THE *Admission* OF *Women Physicians*

MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY

INTO THE MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY

A VISUAL TIMELINE PRESENTED BY THE MMS COMMITTEE ON WOMEN IN MEDICINE

The admission of women physicians in 1884 into a venerable institution such as the Massachusetts Medical Society was a historic milestone — progressive for its time — that facilitated the opening of doors for women. By the end of the 19th century, the number of women physicians in the United States grew to the thousands from a mere couple of hundred in 1860. By the early 1900s, women physicians were faculty members at prestigious medical schools and had established a presence in organized medicine. Today, women physicians hold top-ranking positions in the medical field. Next year, the Society will proudly welcome its fourth woman president.

— Edith M. John, MD, MPH, 2003–2009 chair of the Committee on Women in Medicine

1849

JANUARY 1849
Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910) becomes the first woman to graduate from an established or "regular" American medical school — New York's Geneva College of Medicine — today known as the Upstate Medical University of the State University of New York at Syracuse.

Photo courtesy of the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

1850

NOVEMBER 1850
Mrs. Nancy E. (Talbot) Clark (1825–1901) of Sharon, Massachusetts, becomes the first woman admitted to Cleveland Medical College, a regular medical school now known as Case Western Reserve University.

Photo courtesy of the Archives of Case Western University

1852

MARCH 1852
Dr. Clark receives her medical degree from Cleveland Medical College and establishes a medical practice in Boston, Massachusetts.

1853

JANUARY 1853
Dr. Clark becomes the first woman physician to apply for membership in the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS). The Society's Bylaws are silent on the issue of gender.

FEBRUARY 1853
The Society resolves that district medical societies have a duty to give the admission examination — a prerequisite for membership — only to male candidates.

1854

MAY 1854
Elizabeth Blackwell meets Marie Zakrzewska (1829–1902), a midwife and aspiring physician who had recently emigrated from Germany. Marie goes to work in Dr. Blackwell's free clinic for impoverished women and children in New York City.

Photo courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

1854–1856

Marie Zakrzewska studies at Cleveland Medical College, where she receives her medical degree in 1856.

1856

1856–1859
Dr. Zakrzewska returns to New York and assists Dr. Blackwell in opening the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, a hospital where women physicians are able to receive postgraduate training.

1859

1859
Dr. Zakrzewska applies for membership in the MMS without success.

1859–1862
Dr. Zakrzewska accepts an appointment as professor of obstetrics at New England Female Medical College, which becomes Boston University School of Medicine in 1873.

1862

1862
Dr. Zakrzewska establishes the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Roxbury, Massachusetts, a training hospital for women physicians.

1864

1864
Dr. Henry I. Bowditch (1808–1892), a prominent Boston physician, MMS member, and cofounding member of the Boston Medical Library who serves as a consultant at Dr. Zakrzewska's hospital, encourages her to apply again for MMS membership. Her application is turned down, but the opposition has weakened.

Photo courtesy of the Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine

1872

OCTOBER 1872
Dr. Susan Dimock (1847–1875), a graduate of the New England Female Medical College (now Boston University School of Medicine) and the University of Zurich Medical School, applies for admission to the MMS. The Society appoints a committee of five members to report back at their meeting in February 1873.

Photo courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

1873

FEBRUARY 1873
Though four of the five members vote in favor of admitting women doctors, the question is referred for a legal opinion.

JUNE 1873
The Society is informed it has the right to accept or deny admission to women physicians. The vote to accept women for admission is defeated by a small majority.

1875

JUNE 1875
Dr. Bowditch makes a motion at the MMS Annual Meeting to appoint a committee of five members to devise a plan to admit qualified women physicians into the Society. The motion is seconded and passed.

1875
Dr. Susan Dimock dies at the age of 28 in a shipwreck off the coast of England.

1879

OCTOBER 1879
Dr. James K. Chadwick (1844–1905), a specialist in women's health, publishes "The Study and Practice of Medicine by Women," a historical essay on the increasing trend of women in medicine that made a positive impact on women's advances in the field. Dr. Chadwick, an MMS member and cofounding member of the Boston Medical Library, established the Department of Gynecology at Boston City Hospital in 1874.

Photo courtesy of the Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine

1875–1880
Over the next five years, numerous committees are convened by the Society to deliberate on the question of the admission of qualified women physicians. The issue remains unresolved, often after a close vote.

1880

OCTOBER 1880
Dr. Chadwick sends a questionnaire to the secretary of every state medical society in the United States regarding its policy on the membership of women physicians. According to his survey, 17 state medical societies indicate that gender is not grounds for denying admission. By 1881, 115 women physicians are members of state medical societies.

1882

1880–1882
Dr. Bowditch again presents resolutions at Society meetings requesting women physicians be allowed to take examinations for admission; the resolutions are either tabled or indefinitely postponed.

1884

SEPTEMBER 25, 1884
Dr. Emma Louisa Call (1847–1937) of Cambridge, Massachusetts, is admitted as the first woman physician member of the MMS. She was graduated from the University of Michigan School of Medicine, Class of 1873, with top honors and continued post-graduate medical study in Vienna. She interned and then practiced at the New England Hospital for Women and Children from 1875 to 1902 and as a consulting obstetrician from 1902 to 1920. She retired in 1928.

Photo courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. JM Sanders Portrait Collection

JUNE 1884
Dr. Zakrzewska, nearing the end of her professional career, declines an invitation to apply for MMS membership, but encourages her trainees to apply.

JUNE 10, 1884
Dr. Bowditch opens debate on the Bylaws amendment that would make women physicians eligible for membership. The amendment is carried by 63 affirmative votes and 47 negative votes.

This material was compiled by Edith M. John, MD, 2003–2009 chair of the Committee on Women in Medicine, for presentation at the 2009 MMS Annual Meeting. The Committee on Women in Medicine would also like to acknowledge the support of the leadership and staff of the Boston Medical Library, including Dr. Scott Podolsky and Ms. Giordana Mecagni at the Center for the History of Medicine. The committee would also like to thank Dr. Subramanyam Jayasundar for devoting many hours of his time to make this exhibit possible.