Recognizing Women's History Month 2024

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For the last several years, I have highlighted prominent women in medicine like Dr. Rosalind Franklin, Florence Nightingale and Dr. Jane Cooke Wright.

I was recently made aware of another prominent female physician, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman in America to receive a medical degree. She was a strong advocate for women in medicine and eventually opened a medical college for women.

Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, Feb. 3, 1821 - May 31, 1910

In the early 1800s, there were few medical colleges in our country--and none that accepted women. Despite this, Blackwell was inspired to pursue an education in medicine after a dying friend shared that her experience would have been better if she had a female physician.

After applying to several medical schools without success, Blackwell was admitted into Geneva Medical College in rural New York. Still, she faced discrimination and was shunned by her fellow students who felt she should pursue a more traditional career path. Undeterred, she eventually gained the respect of her colleagues and professors and received her medical degree from Geneva Medical College in 1849, graduating first in her class.

Her education took her to Europe, where she took an interest in preventive care and personal hygiene as a means to prevent outbreaks often caused by male physicians who did not wash their hands between patients.

Following her additional training, she returned to New York where she continued to face discrimination, this time from patients who did not want to be treated by a female physician. Nevertheless, she continued to rally and opened her own clinic to treat impoverished women before eventually helping to open the New York Infirmary for Women and Children and a medical college to help provide opportunities for fellow female physicians.

It was great to learn more about Dr. Blackwell and her impact on medical education. Please join me in celebrating and recognizing women in medicine during Women's History Month.

I used this story about Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell in my every two-week Executive Vice Chancellor/Dean column at the University of Missouri. I received a number of compliments on the piece. My favorite was from one of the neurologists at MU, Komal Ashraf DO. She told me her daughter Grace wrote her own piece on Dr. Blackwell for a fifth-grade milestone project. Grace brought another perspective on Dr. Blackwell. I asked Dr. Ashraf and Grace if I could publish her piece along with mine in this issue of RRNMF Neuromuscular Journal. I was happy they said yes. So here is my co-author's part of the story on Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell.

Elizabeth Blackwell, by Grace Ashraf

Did you know that Elizabeth Blackwell was the first female physician and doctor? She convinced male doctors and teachers that women could participate in more than house-related activities such as cooking and sewing. Elizabeth had many hardships throughout her life. Elizabeth was very brave.

Elizabeth Blackwell was born on February 3rd,1821, in Bristol, England. She was raised by her dad, Samuel Blackwell, and her mom, Hannah Blackwell. She was also raised by her Aunt Bar and a governess. Her mom was very busy with nine kids and Elizabeth was the third oldest. When Elizabeth's dad died when she was seventeen, her mom turned their house into a boarding school for girls, Elizabeth never married, but she adopted a girl named Katherine "Kitty" Barry from an Irish orphanage.

Elizabeth Blackwell's major accomplishment was that she became the first woman doctor. She is famous because of her strong character traits such as bravery and perseverance. Elizabeth even became someone special to America by also going through very hard and tough times. Elizabeth was an amazing person.

Elizabeth Blackwell made it possible for women to realize that they could do more than domestic activities, she made this possible by becoming the first woman doctor and surgeon. She did this by working very hard. She pushed through adversity, she had to advocate for herself, she studied diligently, and she persevered. She changed history by empowering other women to go into medicine. Elizabeth showed powerful men that women were able to use their intellect for helping to heal people and have similar jobs as them. She was the first female to publish a medical article, and she was a leader in organizing healthcare providers during the American Civil War.

Elizabeth Blackwell burned her eyes when she was treating someone with medicine. From that time until her death, she was blind in one eye. After that, Elizabeth wanted to quit her efforts to become a doctor, but her sister encouraged her to keep going. Elizabeth regained her strength and confidence. She was brave, confident, loving, and convincing.

Elizabeth was also strong and smart. In London, she helped start a medical school for women. One of her quotes is "It is not easy to be a pioneer- but oh, it is fascinating!"

Elizabeth Blackwell died on May 31st, 1910, in her house in Hastings, Sussex, after suffering a stroke that paralyzed half of her body. Fifteen years before she died, Elizabeth published her autobiography, *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women*. In 1906, Elizabeth took her first and last car ride while visiting the United States of America.
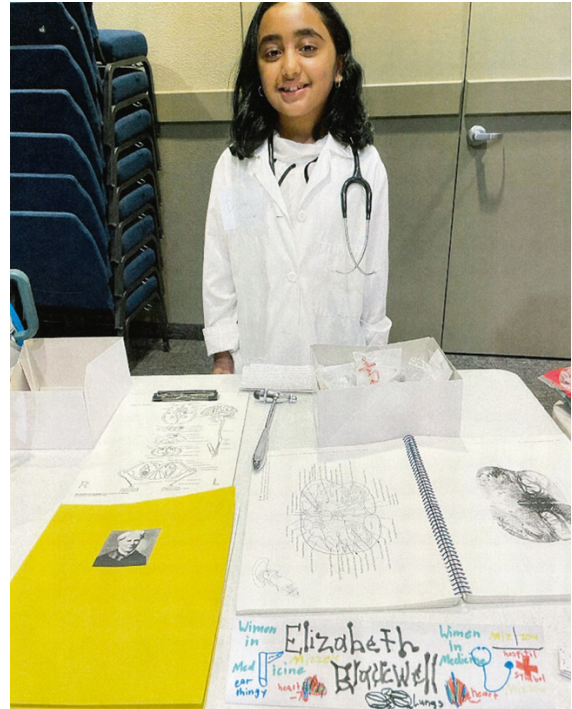
Grace Ashraf and her mother, UMHC neurologist Dr. Komal Ashraf, DO at Grace's 5th grade Milestone Project presentation