Physicians Reflect on the Trailblazing Women Who Changed Medicine

March is Women’s History Month, a time to reflect on women’s contributions to culture and society as a whole. This month, NorthShore leaders reflected on the tremendous historical impact of women in healthcare.

Elizabeth Blackwell, MD (1821-1910) was the first woman in the United States to earn a medical degree. After graduating first in her class from New York’s Geneva College, Blackwell opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, which employed several women physicians. Eventually, she opened a New York City Medical College and became a professor of gynecology for a university in London. Blackwell’s legacy lives on in her own autobiography titled Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women.

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Virginia Apgar, MD (1909-1974) famously created the “Apgar score,” which measures the health of newborn babies. After earning her medical degree from Columbia University, Apgar intended to pursue surgery, but advice from her mentor led Apgar to become a world-renowned anesthesiologist.

“I am proud to use the Apgar score every day. Dr. Apgar’s impact is tremendous and pervasive, but her contributions are relatively recent. There is still room for each of us as women in medicine to make our mark and elevate the standard of care,” said Bridget Wild, MD, Pediatric Hospitalist at NorthShore.

Mary Putnam Jacobi, MD (1842-1906) won Harvard’s Boylston Prize for disproving the long-held belief that physical or mental exertion during menstruation was dangerous to women. She became the first woman to study at l’École de Médecine in Paris, and the first woman accepted into the New York Academy of Medicine. Throughout her career, Jacobi fought for co-education of men and women, later founding the Association for the Advancement of the Medical Education of Women in 1872.

“Dr. Jacobi had an inspiring journey to success, and it’s important to point out that she fought for women to learn alongside men. We are equals, and collaboration is the best way forward,” said Charu Gupta, MD, Lead for Cardiology Obstetrics and Advanced Heart Failure Specialist at NorthShore.

Patricia Goldman-Rakic, PhD (1937-2003) and her research contributions improved the medical field’s understanding of many neurological diseases, including Alzheimer’s, cerebral palsy, Parkinson’s and schizophrenia. Throughout her career, Goldman-Rakic was also a beloved mentor to several junior researchers. In 1990, she was admitted to the National Academy of Sciences.

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For more information about the incredible team of women doctors making a difference at NorthShore, visit NorthShore.org/doctors