

11b - Medical Breakthrough

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Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to receive a degree from a medical college, helped pave the way for women seeking the same educational — and professional — opportunities as men. Blackwell was rejected from 29 schools of medicine because of her gender.

Finally, a small medical college in Geneva, New York, agreed to accept her as a student in the fall of 1847. Blackwell wrote an account of the long and frustrating admissions process, including advice she received about how to circumvent the seemingly insurmountable hurdle of being born a female.

During these fruitless efforts my kindly Quaker adviser, whose private lectures I attended, said to me: "Elizabeth, it is of no use trying. Thee cannot gain admission to these schools. Thee must go to Paris and don masculine attire to gain the necessary knowledge."

Curiously enough, this suggestion of disguise made by good Dr. Warrington was also given me by Doctor Pankhurst, the Professor of Surgery in the largest college in Philadelphia.

He thoroughly approved of a woman's gaining complete medical knowledge; told me that although my public entrance into the classes was out of the question, yet if I would assume masculine attire and enter the college he could entirely rely on two or three of his students to whom he should communicate my disguise, who would watch the class and give me timely notice to withdraw should my disguise be suspected.

But neither the advice to go to Paris nor the suggestion of disguise tempted me for a moment. It was to my mind a moral crusade on which I had entered, a course of justice and common sense, and it must be pursued in the light of day, and with public sanction, in order to accomplish its end.
