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From Healer to Healthcare Professional, Women's Evolving Role in Medicine: A Social Historical Review.

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Abstract

Background: Women have historically always played large roles in healthcare, but they were barred from practicing medicine until the mid-nineteenth century. Much like the rest of history, which has traditionally been written about men, their role within medicine has largely been overlooked.

Methods: This study aimed to establish the evolution of women's role in medicine since the 14th century through social historical review. This qualitative study consisted of searching databases and archives to collate primary and secondary sources, which were then thematically analysed. Three major themes emerged which focused on the female stereotype in medicine, women as medical professionals, and women in the medical workplace. Through these, several subthemes emerged.

Results: Initially, medicine was largely provided by Abbesses and nuns in monasteries, but the 14th century saw the establishment of laws to prevent women from practicing medicine, despite many having greater skills than their male colleagues. Several women continued to practice forms of healthcare, including lay medicine which was passed down through female social circles. The majority of people accused of witchcraft in the European witch-hunts were women, but only a small percentage of these were classed as being healers or midwives. It was not until the nineteenth century where several pioneering women were admitted to medical schools through their continued petitioning and determination. They were forced to create job opportunities for themselves, lobbying medical colleges to grant them licence to practice. They also established medical schools so future generations of women could more easily qualify. Despite this, women were still discouraged from entering medicine. To this day, women still experience several forms of discrimination once qualified.

Conclusions: There is still large discrepancy between the number of women in senior medical roles compared to the number of women in medicine on the whole. To counter this, there needs to be more support for women to balance their career and caring responsibilities, as well as addressing microaggressions and gender bias. The history of women in medicine provides us with information we can use to establish fairer practice for future generations.

Keywords: Role of Women | History of Medicine | Women's History | Female Physicians |

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