

# Women in Surgery: A History of Adversity, Resilience, and Accomplishment

Aamna M Ali, MD, Carie Lea McVay, MD, FACS

*Being challenged in life is inevitable, being defeated is optional.*

—Roger Crawford (first and only American to play a Division I college sport with a severe disability)<sup>1</sup>

## ENTRY TO A SYSTEM OF MALE MEDICAL STUDENTS, MALE RESIDENTS, AND MALE SURGEONS

Dr Miranda Stewart is considered the first female surgeon in Britain and Canada; she spent more than 40 years impersonating a man to practice medicine. Dr Stewart practiced as the “beardless” surgeon Dr James Barry for her entire career before her autopsy revealed her to be a woman.<sup>2,3</sup> About the time that Dr Stewart’s career was in full swing, Elizabeth Blackwell and her sister Emily were attempting to gain admission to medical school in the US.

Blackwell is a figure well-known to many, even those who are not avid students of history (Fig. 1). She graduated in 1849, first in her class, although she had initially been rejected by more than 20 medical schools because of her sex.<sup>4</sup> When she did get her medical degree, she could not find a job as a surgeon because patients did not want to be treated by a female surgeon. She received training as an apprentice in Europe for some time before she returned to the US to open an infirmary and medical school in New York. By that time, the next generation of aspiring female surgeons had emerged.

Many credit Mary Edwards Walker, the second woman to graduate medical school in the US, as being the first female surgeon in this country; though of note, Dr Blackwell did want to practice surgery and had to give up this aspiration due to an ophthalmic condition she caught from a patient (Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> Dr Walker volunteered with the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War to practice true surgery; she is credited with

performing dozens of amputations.<sup>2,5</sup> Besides being a surgeon, she was also a feminist, abolitionist, prisoner of war, and recipient of the Medal of Honor. In the time after her graduation from medical school, her fledgling practice succumbed to financial hardship and the social stigma that female physicians could not be as well-qualified as males. However, she continued to practice surgery and medicine until her death, which, unfortunately, came 1 year before the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which granted women the right to vote and of which she had been an ardent supporter.<sup>6,7</sup>

## A TRIBUTE TO THE WOMEN WHO WOULD NOT PURSUE SURGERY

There are many other “should have been” female surgeons that decorate the halls of history and deserve mention. Virginia Apgar could not find a long-term job as a surgeon, and was discouraged from doing so by Dr Allen Whipple, only because he had seen his previous female students be outcast and suffer financially. He redirected her toward anesthesiology, and her contributions to obstetrics and anesthesiology have helped save the lives of thousands of neonates and continue to do so today.<sup>8</sup> Dr Florence Sabin, who initially intended to pursue surgery, was appointed the first female professor at Johns Hopkins Medical School in 1917. She saw more opportunity and less resistance in pursuing immunology and neurobiology than surgery, and contributed greatly to both fields.<sup>6</sup> Verena Holmes, another female physician for whom the doors of surgery barred entry, contributed to the surgical sciences by patenting more than 100 inventions, including otolaryngology tonsil forceps, various retractors, surgeon’s headlamp (patent #278,827), and, interestingly but unrelatedly, parts of internal combustion engines.<sup>9</sup> Dr Helen Taussig’s contribution to the Blalock-Taussig surgery for blue babies is well-documented and deserves a separate academic inquiry of its own, which this narrative cannot delve into and do it justice, so it will not be attempted.

## A TRIBUTE TO THE WOMEN WHO DID PURSUE SURGERY

Yet, the women who were allowed into the field of surgery made staggering progress and many remain

**Disclosure Information:** Nothing to disclose.

Received April 8, 2016; Revised May 22, 2016; Accepted June 15, 2016. From the Kaiser Foundation Hospital, Fontana (Ali, McVay) and Arrowhead Regional Medical Center, Colton (Ali), CA. Correspondence address: Aamna M Ali, MD, Kaiser Foundation Hospital, Arrowhead Regional Medical Center, 9985 Sierra Ave, MOB 3, Fontana, CA 92335. email: [aamna0601@gmail.com](mailto:aamna0601@gmail.com)



**Figure 1.** Elizabeth Blackwell. (From the National Library of Medicine, NIH<sup>4</sup>).

unsung heroes. Harriet Jones was both the first licensed female surgeon in the US (1885) and the first woman to serve in the state legislature.<sup>5</sup> It was almost 60 years later, in 1940, when a woman would be board certified in surgery, because many women who graduated from surgery residencies were not allowed to sit for the boards before this. Dr Tenley Albright was one of the first specialized woman surgeons; she was also the first American woman to win a gold medal in figure skating. Nina Braunwald was the first woman elected to the American Association for Thoracic Surgery,



**Figure 2.** Mary Edwards Walker, an abolitionist and a surgeon. (From the National Library of Medicine, NIH<sup>7</sup>).

additionally, she designed the first prosthetic mitral heart valve in the world, which she then proceeded to implant successfully in 1960 in the first surgery of its kind.<sup>5,10</sup> Virginia Frantz was the first female president of the American Thyroid Society and, along with Dr Whipple, described the secretion of insulin by pancreatic tumors in 1935.<sup>5,9</sup> The first 2 female surgeons deemed Fellows of the American College of Surgeons, both in 1913, were Florence West Duckering, MD, from the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston, and Alice Gertrude Bryant, MD.<sup>11</sup> The female surgeons who led the path toward opening the doors of many firsts were revolutionary not only in medicine but usually in several different arenas.

Many women achieved renown in locoregional circles. Dorothy Lavinia Brown was a prime example (Fig. 3). She grew up in an orphanage in the South. Later, she was not only the first African-American female surgeon in the South and the first African-American woman in the American College of Surgeons, she was also the first woman to become chief of surgery at any hospital in the country. She also became the first single woman in Tennessee to be granted the right to adopt a child, and was the first African-American woman to serve in the Tennessee state legislature.<sup>12,13</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was the first British woman surgeon, first female dean of a medical school, first female medical doctor in France, first woman to be elected to a school board, first female mayor, and first female magistrate in Britain.<sup>14</sup> Today, a number of female leaders are renowned for their



**Figure 3.** Dorothy Lavinia Brown, born a rebel and contrarian, she was a widely recognized pioneer and risk-taker by her death in 2004. (From the National Library of Medicine, NIH<sup>12</sup>).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4290469>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4290469>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)