



SPECIAL ARTICLE

Hispanic women in doctoral medical education in 19th century



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Abstract

Background: Women's access to education, and more specifically, to medical studies has been a long and painful conquest for equality. In the 19th century, the number of women who actually went to Hispanic universities was small.

Method: This is a descriptive historical and documentary study that reviews six doctoral dissertations retrieved from two databases, the *Catálogo Completo* and *Tesis UCM*, from the Complutense University of Madrid.

Results: This study recovers and describes six pioneer doctoral theses defended in nineteenth century by Hispanic women, and it attempts to highlight the early presence of Hispanic women doctors in the field of medical doctoral education as professionals of the highest academic excellence. Specifically, it comments on five medical doctorates and one medical–pharmaceutical doctorate written by three Spanish women, as well as one Colombian, one Argentinean, and one Cuban woman.

Conclusions: A key conclusion is that Hispanic women have produced six pioneering dissertations of singular importance with a multidisciplinary medical scope covering the topics, such as women education, hygiene, ophthalmology, gynecology, and pharmacology.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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Tesis doctorales;
Siglo XIX;
Mujeres doctoras;
Historia de la educación médica

Mujeres hispanas en la educación médica doctoral del siglo XIX**Resumen**

Antecedentes: El acceso de las mujeres a la educación y más específicamente a los estudios médicos ha supuesto una conquista larga y penosa por la igualdad. En el siglo XIX el número de mujeres que fueron a las universidades hispanas fue pequeño.

Método: Se trata de un estudio descriptivo histórico y documental que revisa seis tesis doctorales pioneras recuperadas de dos bases de datos, el *Catálogo Completo* y *Tesis UCM*, de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

Resultados: Este estudio recupera y describe seis tesis doctorales defendidas en el siglo XIX por mujeres hispanas, y trata de destacar la temprana presencia de las mujeres en el campo de la educación médica doctoral y como profesionales de la más alta excelencia académica. Concretamente, comenta las tesis de cinco doctoras médicas y una doctora médico-farmacéutica escritas por tres mujeres españolas, una colombiana, una argentina y una cubana.

Conclusiones: Como conclusión clave se muestra como, en el siglo XIX, seis mujeres hispanas produjeron otras tantas tesis pioneras, de singular relevancia, y con un alcance médico multidisciplinario que cubre temas tales como: la educación de las mujeres, la higiene, la oftalmología, la obstetricia y la farmacología.

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Introduction

Historical studies in medical education are fitting and relevant because the identity of medical education will then further expand as it writes its own history. Literature about history of medical education is plentiful, for example, the seminal book written by Puschmann¹ in 1889 or the compilation edited by O'Malley.² Nevertheless, though history of medical education is extensive, some lacunae are inevitable. Indeed, some topics must be faced with the problem of their consideration into a determined context or bounded to a historical period; see for example the subject of medical travels³ for educational purposes in 18th century. So then, we are considering here another topic scarcely studied: Hispanic pioneer women doctors as a relevant archetype in medical education.

Certainly women's access to education and more specifically to medical studies has been a long and painful conquest for equality. In the case of Hispanic countries, such an achievement is even more commendable, given the countries' often unique context of institutionalized misogyny, a common and accepted social pattern ("that's how it was" to put it colloquially) that with patience and, above all, sound arguments and best practices has, over time, slowly dissipated.

The most flagrant and glaring case of institutionalized misogyny was, perhaps, that of Trinidad Arroyo Villaverde, who was denied the possibility of enrolling in undergraduate studies in medicine by the rector of the University of Valladolid. It was only later, after a petition from the student's father, that the General Director for Public Education lifted the prohibition with a legal provision.⁴

Legal provisions to allow women access to higher education were continual and contradictory. Abundant regulatory documentation can be found in the Ministry of Education and Science; see Women and Science Unit's research monographs, especially *Women academics in number*⁵ and *Women*

scientists in number.⁶ In 1882, a Spanish Royal Decree dated March 16th suspended "here in after the admission of ladies to Higher Education", which, however, did not prevent two women from defending their dissertations that very same year. In 1888, another Royal Decree dated June 11th resolved "that women shall be admitted to studies under the Directorate General of Public Education as students of teaching, but will need the authorization of the Council of Ministers in order to register as regular students". Women would have to wait until 1910 in order for Spanish King Alfonso XIII to ratify the Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts' Royal Decree, which gave them the right to free access to all educational institutions and official admittance to universities.

If at the time the number of women who actually went to Hispanic universities was small, smaller still was the number who managed to defend a doctoral dissertation; in fact it could be said that they could be counted on the fingers of two hands. At face value, it would seem that Hispanic countries were far removed from the small but clever Swiss nation,⁷ a true pioneer in women's access to doctoral studies, or from the French and British models and formats with their medical schools and hospitals exclusively for women⁸ or the powerful American historiographical movement on Women and Medicine that even published its own magazine, the *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association*. However, this study aims to provide evidence to demonstrate that the belief that there was a total lack of Hispanic women in the doctoral field especially in Medicine is unsustainable.

Historic antecedents of women education

In the Ancient Régime, the subject of women's education in Spain is documented in a particularly significant primary source manuscript published in 1790, *Discurso sobre la educacion fisica y moral de las mujeres* (Discourse on the physical and moral education of women) by Josepha

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