

## Elizabeth Blackwell

On a spring day in 1847, Elizabeth Blackwell arrived in Philadelphia. She was 26 years old and eager to enroll in one of the city's medical schools. "You're smart and very determined, but I doubt that any of our schools will accept you," advised Dr. Warrington, a family friend. "No woman has ever been admitted to an American medical school."

As he had predicted, Elizabeth was turned down by all of the schools in Philadelphia. Unwilling to give up, she wrote to schools in other cities and towns. Again she received nothing but rejections. At last, Geneva Medical College, a small school in upstate New York, accepted Elizabeth. Not expecting her to come, its students had voted her in as a joke.

The faculty and students were amazed when the small, plainly dressed woman arrived at the college. But Elizabeth soon impressed everyone. In 1849 she graduated at the top of her class and became the first woman in America to become a doctor.

When Blackwell went to New York City to start her medical practice, she had trouble finding anyone willing to rent office space to a woman doctor. Some thought that examining other people's bodies was shameful behavior for a lady. Others suspected that she was a **quack**. Blackwell finally found a satisfactory place to rent, but only a few patients came.

By 1853 Blackwell's practice was growing, but was still very small. She rented a room in a **squalid** slum area of New York and announced that three afternoons a week she would see patients there at no charge. The people who came to her free clinic lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions that led to the spread of diseases. Blackwell soon realized that these were the patients, especially the women and children, who most needed her care. She must find a way, she decided, to open her own hospital where they could be treated.

Blackwell did find a way. With money from private donations and fund raising fairs, she was able to buy and equip a building in a suitable location. On May 12, 1857, her hospital, the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, opened. Patients who were too poor to pay received medical care for free. Those who could pay were charged 4 dollars a week. The hospital was staffed entirely by women. Blackwell was the director. Her younger sister, Emily, who had become a doctor in 1855, performed operations.

In 1868 Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell started the Woman's Medical College of the New York Infirmary. It grew rapidly and was praised for its high standards of training.

With courage and determination, Elizabeth Blackwell helped pave the way for women to attend medical schools and win acceptance and respect as doctors. At the beginning of this **century**, 45 percent of all medical students in America were women.



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