

Opening the Doors of Medicine to Women

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At the time of the inception of osteopathy in the late 19th century, the practice of medicine was dominated by men. In 1892, Andrew Taylor Still, MD, DO, opened the American School of Osteopathy (ASO) in Kirksville, Missouri. Still stated: “I opened wide the doors of my first school for ladies.”^{1(p413)} The ASO not only was the first college of osteopathic medicine, an entirely new and innovative medical reformation, but also accepted female students on an equal basis as male students. The first catalog of the ASO stated:

Women are admitted on the same terms as men. It is the policy of the school that there shall be no distinction as to sex, and that all shall have the same opportunities, and be held to the same requirements. They pursue the same studies, attend the same lectures, are subjected to the same rules, and pass the same examinations.²

When Still established the ASO, most medical schools were open to men only.³ A smaller number of medical schools, mostly homeopathic and eclectic, accepted few women into their classes,⁴ and a handful of all-female medical schools existed.⁵

The ASO’s first class had 6 women in a class of 23 students. The word rapidly spread and, in 1897, Alice Patterson, DO, ASO class of 1895 and one of the school’s early faculty members, wrote: “We now have about one hundred earnest, intelligent, level-headed, rather than ‘strong-minded,’ young women in our school.”⁶

Blanche Still, DO, the daughter of Still and an 1895 graduate of the ASO, wrote: “There is no science more beautiful than Osteopathy, none better adapted to woman whose delicate sense of touch makes her qualified for its study and practice.”^{7(p245)}

Still firmly believed in the equality of the sexes. His mother, sisters, and wife were all strong, self-sufficient pioneer women on the American frontier, and Still had witnessed their strength and ingenuity. He had no doubt that women could be

the equal of men in the practice of medicine. Still included women and minorities in the profession since its inception.⁸

Since 2011, the osteopathic medical profession has seen a 63% increase in female osteopathic physicians younger than 35 years.⁹ Thanks to the work of Still and women like Louisa A. Burns, DO, and Jeanette Hubbard Bolles, DO, who continued to push the osteopathic profession toward gender equality, 40% of osteopathic physicians in active practice today are women.⁹(doi:10.7556/jaoa.2017.028)

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