

Dr Sophia Jex-Blake and the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women, 1886–1898

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ABSTRACT Set in a period when women were finding new avenues for their intellectual abilities, this article gives a short account of the genesis, achievements and collapse of the first Medical School for Women in Scotland, set up by Dr Sophia Jex-Blake

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INTRODUCTION

Sophia Jex-Blake was the leader of the small group of women who began their medical studies at the Extramural School of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons of Edinburgh. In 1872 they were refused permission to continue their studies at the University of Edinburgh. As a result these women had to complete their medical education abroad before they were able to add their names to the Medical Register in Britain. Dr Jex-Blake became the driving force behind the foundation of the London School of Medicine for Women in 1874. Thereafter she went on to qualify MD, Berne in 1876 and LRCPI at Kings and Queens Colleges of Physicians of Ireland in 1877. When she was not appointed to take a leading role in the organisation of the new School in London she decided to return to Edinburgh in 1878.¹

In Edinburgh, Dr Jex-Blake had the support of a number of doctors who gave her advice and practical help, including Drs George Balfour, Patrick Heron Watson, Angus Macdonald and Peel Ritchie; they had all supported the women during their medical studies ten years earlier. Dr Jex-Blake knew that she had both friends and foes in Edinburgh. She was an English woman doctor who, at the age of 38, did not attend church as regularly as some other people; she was openly in favour of women's suffrage, and she drove her own pony and trap around Edinburgh. Dr Jex-Blake was well aware that many people did not accept women doctors as she explained in an article in *Nineteenth Century* in November 1887. For two successive years, a circular from *The Lancet* had invited her by name to send reports of any interesting cases occurring in the course of her work. When she responded with an article she received '...a hurried assurance from the

editor that it was all a mistake, and that in fact *The Lancet* could not stoop to record medical experiences, however interesting, if they occurred in the practice of the inferior sex'.²

Dr Jex-Blake put up her plate in the west end of Edinburgh and three months later opened a small clinic (dispensary) for women in a poor area of the city not far from her home. She later added a few beds alongside the clinic. The first woman doctor in Scotland soon became recognised as an excellent medical practitioner.

In 1883 Dr Jex-Blake moved from her home in Manor Place to Bruntsfield Lodge. The house was large with a spacious garden. Here were brought patients in need of special medical care or peaceful surroundings in which to recuperate for a while. Perhaps the success of these few special cases reinforced the idea of adding beds to the Dispensary. The Edinburgh Hospital and Dispensary for Women and Children, with four beds and a small private ward, was opened in 1885, at No. 6 Grove Street, Fountainbridge. The quietness of a small hospital as respite from their overcrowded noisy homes was immediately appreciated by many women. Once the hospital and dispensary were firmly established there was a small but steady stream of patients.

Edinburgh University still continued to refuse to admit women medical students. However, in 1885 the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland opened its classes and examinations to women and the following year the Scottish Conjoint Board of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons in Edinburgh and the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow opened its triple examination to women.³ The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the Royal Faculty of Physicians and

Surgeons of Glasgow also recognised the courses of instruction given at the Extramural School in Edinburgh and some lecturers agreed to admit women to their classes while others were willing to give separate lectures to women (at higher fees because of the smaller numbers in the classes).⁴

Dr Jex-Blake's response to these new opportunities for women medical students was typical. She had considerable experience in the field of education and she now determined to open her own medical school for women. Her earlier contacts, both encouraging and forbidding, with professors, lawyers and members of parliament, were invaluable. Aware that some women had already enquired about the possibilities of a course of medical studies, Dr Jex-Blake informed the campaigning National Association for Promoting the Medical Education of Women of her intention to start medical classes for women. Although the Association had not yet given their approval she nevertheless went ahead and advertised for students. She estimated that fees would be about £140 for the whole course, including the cost of books and instruments and also the fees for examinations and diplomas. Board and lodging were not included, for it was expected that most students would come from the Edinburgh area and so be able to live at home. Dr Jex-Blake guaranteed any shortfall in the fees that the students themselves could not provide and underwrote all expenses for the School.⁵ The expectation that most students would come from a fairly local area was not borne out. Women came from all parts of Britain, ten came from India and a few others from Australia, South Africa and America.

THE EDINBURGH SCHOOL OF MEDICINE FOR WOMEN

The National Association accepted Dr Jex-Blake's financial proposals and appointed her Organising Secretary and Dean of the School. In October 1886, eight women students, whose ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-three years, started to study in separate classes in Surgeons' Hall, an integral part of the Extramural School. A small executive committee was formed from the members of the National Association with Dr Balfour FRCPE as chairman. Dr Balfour had been Physician to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and later Librarian and President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh.

Arrangements for the use of the library and laboratories proved unsatisfactory during the first year of study. However alternative accommodation soon became available. A building in Surgeon Square was suitably adapted and in October 1887 the students were able to move into their own fully equipped building, which included a library, lecture theatre and anatomical museum.

The students were still unable to do their clinical training in the Royal Infirmary. The stated difficulty was that if women were to see patients in the hospital they would have to be able to attend women-only clinics at different times from the male students. Similar arrangements would have to be made for the women to visit cases in the wards. All this would have meant considerable disruption for the hospital staff and this was not acceptable. Faced with these obstacles, Dr Jex-Blake looked elsewhere. Negotiations with the managers of Leith Hospital ended happily and the women were allowed to attend clinics there. In 1888, after due examination, the Conjoint Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons admitted Dr Jex-Blake as a lecturer in Midwifery and Diseases of Women – the first woman lecturer in a medical school in Scotland.⁶

The School was now established, although the financial position was never really satisfactory. The committee therefore appealed for scholarships to be funded. The National Association for the Promoting of Medical Education of Women and a number of Missionary Societies responded, as did a number of individuals. In the article *Medical Women: A Ten Years' Retrospective*, Dr Jex-Blake discussed the need for women doctors in India, for which a distinguished Indian gentleman Sir Salar Jung had written in 1880 that:

'...it would be a great benefit to India, a benefit that could not be exaggerated, if English medical women, educated completely in England could settle in the chief towns of India.'

He had argued that more than a thousand doctors would be needed as a start. With only fifty-four women doctors on the British Medical Register, Dr Jex-Blake commented 'is it possible to have stronger evidence of the pressing need of increased facilities and national aid for the medical education of women?'

Some Indian universities had opened their medical classes to women students but not to graduate level. At the start of the summer term 1888, Annie Wardlaw Jaganntham, a Hindu woman, came to Edinburgh to continue her medical studies. She was soon joined by Annie Wells, who had studied for the Certificate of Medical Practitioner at Madras University and the Grant Duff Gosha Hospital. Dr Jaganntham was the first of many newly qualified doctors to become resident medical officer in the Edinburgh Hospital for Women and Children, to be followed by other newly qualified young doctors in that position. Other doctors who had studied at the School served in more senior posts in the hospital.

After the two women from India graduated, Dr Jex-Blake wrote a second article which was published in *The Spectator* in 1890. She again stressed the need for

women doctors in India. Her plea was answered by Mr James Cropper who instituted a scholarship for that purpose. The first recipient was Rose Govindurajulu who had taken some medical classes in Madras and been given study leave from her post in the Mysore Hospital. Having qualified, she returned to Mysore to become Assistant Physician and later Surgeon in the Mahareenee's Hospital.⁸

BREAKING THE RULES

Dr Jex-Blake was a disciplinarian who expected her students to maintain the high standards that she set, but which perhaps pertained to a slightly earlier time. She expected strict time-keeping; there was to be no talking during the quiet hour set aside for personal study. In order to retain her anonymity each student was to use a motto rather than her name at the top of the class examination papers. At times the students found it difficult, sometimes impossible, to keep within the restrictions laid down by Dr Jex-Blake, particularly those concerning their attendance at Leith Hospital. The students were expected to leave the hospital at five o'clock, but sometimes clinics overran the time and the students stayed on. In the summer term of 1888, the senior house surgeon, Dr Jukes, admitted an interesting accident case and encouraged the students to stay late in order to see the case through. Four students, Grace and Martha Cadell, Elizabeth Christie and Ida Balfour did so. Miss Perry, the superintendent of the hospital, informed Dr Jex-Blake of the infringement. Letters of apology were sent, but the girls had committed a breach of the rules and, with Dr Jex-Blake's agreement, they were suspended from the hospital for a week.

It has to be appreciated that, on the one hand admission to Leith Hospital had been a major breakthrough for the School, set against the long and unsuccessful struggle for admission to the Royal Infirmary. Even at Leith, it is likely that there were individuals who were opposed to the admission of women and who were prepared to object if the opportunity arose. From the School administration's point of view, it was essential that the regulations set down should be adhered to scrupulously. On the other hand the students, with the enthusiasm of pioneers, felt that advancing their knowledge must take precedence over what they felt were petty regulations.

While Dr Jex-Blake and her students were still discussing the difficulties at the hospital other difficulties arose over examinations. One was a continuing problem. Some students had become lax about attending the compulsory class examinations if they did not feel ready for them although their examination certificates and attendance certificates had to be produced before they could be allowed to sit professional examinations. There was also a more particular problem relating to the entrance

examination. Although students were required to sit a preliminary examination before being accepted for medical school, some students started classes before sitting the examination; when the exam was successfully passed at some later date, the date of passing was backdated by the examining authority to the date of the start of classes. One student, Mary Sinclair, became unwell during her examination and went home. As a result she failed to secure a pass in two of the seven subjects. She was therefore surprised when she later received an examination certificate stating that she had passed all subjects. Dr Gibson had interceded for her after hearing that she had been unwell and that her father had died recently. When Dr Jex-Blake censured Miss Sinclair the students felt strongly that she had been unduly harsh.

All these incidents led Dr Jex-Blake to feel that her authority was being undermined. She asked Dr Balfour to agree that the two Cadell sisters, senior students and the leaders in dissent, should be asked not to return to the School in October. The sisters were shocked and requested their lawyer to send a letter to the School asking that their position be reconsidered. This was not forthcoming and so the sisters decided to take the School to court.

The court case was heard in July 1889. It was basically concerned with the five o'clock rule, but other matters such as the Mary Sinclair affair were raised. Some of the girls who testified declared that there had been no change in the atmosphere of the School since the sisters had left; others felt that the atmosphere was more relaxed though they did think that they tended to be treated as children. Dr James Jukes was the senior house surgeon at Leith Hospital who had admitted the accident case and had suggested that the students remain after five o'clock in order to see the case. He thought the five o'clock rule should be flexible as the students' work was important and although patients normally had their tea at five o'clock it sometimes had to be postponed. However, with Dr Jex-Blake's agreement, the five o'clock rule was already being more closely observed after the incident.

On cross-examination Dr Gibson, lecturer in *Materia Medica* and Therapeutics, admitted that he had erred and took the whole blame for the unpleasantness. He had since resigned his position as lecturer in the College of Surgeons and in the School. Mary Sinclair re-sat and passed the examination.

The judgment was given in July 1890. The Misses Cadell were each awarded £50, although they had asked for £500 to offset the fees they alleged that they had overpaid, and expenses.⁹ The case and the press coverage of it caused a serious setback to the reputation of Dr Jex-Blake and her School.

After the summer session of 1889 a number of students moved to St Mungo's College or Queen Margaret College, both in Glasgow, which by then were accepting women medical students. There were separate clinical arrangements for the women at the Maternity Hospital and the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow. Some of the girls moved so as to be nearer to their homes, and others moved because they thought that the facilities for studying surgery were superior to those facilities in Edinburgh. Other students went to London or Dublin, the only other institutions in Britain which offered medical courses to women. Despite the loss of some students, the winter term of 1889–90 saw the enrolment of 28 students in the Surgeon Square School.

THE MEDICAL COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

Although not herself involved, Elsie Inglis was one of the students who had been unhappy at the handling of the five o'clock incident in Leith Hospital; nor did she find it easy to accept Dr Jex-Blake's overbearing attitude to the students. Elsie Inglis therefore left the School at the end of the summer term in 1889. Determined that women should have a proper say in their affairs and with her father's support, Elsie Inglis decided to start her own Medical College for Women.

For whatever reasons, Dr Jex-Blake had lost the backing of a number of influential people in Edinburgh. She did not believe that women should study medicine alongside men although she was happy that men should teach them. She did wish to co-operate with the new College and made overtures to the committee but on her terms. The College Committee feared that the College might be taken over by Dr Jex-Blake and that further problems might arise over the interpretation of regulations. The College Committee claimed that:

'...had the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women been conducted on sound and catholic principles and been truly an open and public establishment, all might have been well, and the need for a fresh effort to obtain free and full medical education for women might not have arisen'.

The new College was opened in Chambers Street, Edinburgh, with 15 students attending classes during the winter session 1889–90. Eighteen lecturers, including Dr Gibson, agreed to give their services. The College committee still had to find suitable clinical instruction in medicine and surgery, although temporary facilities had been arranged at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children. The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh had a large number of students under instruction and the authorities were thus unable to offer separate instruction for women. Although Leith Hospital had the facilities, the management of Dr Jex-Blake's School objected to the proposals to allow the

students from the College to enter Leith Hospital. The managers of the Royal Infirmary eventually agreed to admit women students under certain stringent conditions, which included the sum of £700 to endow two wards that could be used exclusively by the women students. Mixed classes were allowed for the Eye, Nose and Skin clinics.¹⁰ The President of the College had admitted that the College was in debt and would have to close at the end of the year unless the ladies cleared the debt.

LEITH HOSPITAL

The first contract between the School and Leith Hospital was completed with apparent success. The senior surgeon testified in 1889:

'...that the conversion of the hospital into a teaching institution had been of undoubted advantage to the hospital and the patients. The prediction of pessimists that the introduction of lady students would drive away the patients had been completely falsified; the numbers on the contrary had increased, from 397 in 1886 to 429 in 1887 and 460 in 1888.'¹¹

However all was not well. It appears that relations between Dr Jex-Blake and the hospital staff had gradually deteriorated so that when the contract came up for renewal Dr Jex-Blake demanded certain conditions for its renewal:

- 1 One of the Medical Officers should be a woman selected from among the hospital's old students;
- 2 The pathologist at Leith should be recommended and paid by the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women;
- 3 The School should be represented on the Board of Directors of the hospital.

The Directors of the Board of the Hospital agreed to her proposals but made certain provisos. Dr Jex-Blake stood firm so that the contract was not renewed in 1892. Fortunately women had by then been admitted to clinics in the Royal Infirmary. The students also attended clinics at the Dispensary and Hospital in Grove Street and went on home visits with Dr Jex-Blake.¹²

In 1891 the GMC extended the medical courses from four to five years, thus causing a rescheduling of classes and a number of problems as regards fees. In Scotland, the preliminary examination for qualification in medicine and surgery was conducted by the Educational Institute of Scotland on behalf of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons of Edinburgh and Glasgow and was now recognised by the GMC.

Thanks to a public appeal and to some substantial gifts the School was free of debt by 1893. However the number

of students had been declining since the opening of medical classes for women in Glasgow and the Chambers Street College in Edinburgh which charged lower fees than the Surgeon Square School.¹³

OUTREACH

As we have seen, scholarships had been funded for students hoping to go to the mission field. A small committee was therefore formed to assess the potential candidates. The missionary societies had evangelisation as their principal aim in the field. It was the missionaries, both men and women, working in the field who had realised the need for medical missionaries, and indeed some had undertaken medical training while on home leave. In 1889 there was a call for women medical missionaries to be recognised. The Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society advertised a training scheme the following year. The Society insisted that any student wishing to have a bursary from them must study at the Chambers Street College which charged lower fees.¹⁴

Other missionary societies were sending out women with only limited knowledge of medical subjects after a two-year course. The Edinburgh and the London Schools therefore insisted that any student wishing to become a medical missionary must take the full four-year course of tuition so that she would become a fully qualified and registered doctor. In 1890, the Medical Training Home for Lady Missionaries in Glasgow advertised:

‘...a two year course in Medical Instruction for Christian young ladies, of any evangelical denomination, desirous of becoming Missionaries in the Foreign Field; and of helping to prepare such young ladies for Missionary Work abroad, by seeking, as far as it shall not interfere with their medical studies, to interest them practically in Home Mission Work.’¹⁵

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY ADMITS WOMEN

The University (Scotland) Act 1888 had granted powers to the University Commissioners to enable each of the four Scottish Universities to admit women to faculties and to provide for their instruction. Ordinance No.18 – General No.9 – of the Commission was approved by Order in Council in 1892. The Ordinance of the Commissioners made provision for women to be instructed in any subjects taught in the University either in ordinary classes or by instituting classes conducted by professors or lecturers:

‘...provided always that the University Court shall not institute classes where men and women shall be taught together except after consultation with the Senatus, and provided also that no professor whose commission is dated before the approval of this

Ordinance by Her Majesty in Council shall be required, without his consent, to conduct classes to which women are admitted’.¹⁶

Dr Jex-Blake appeared before the Commissioners several times and wrote of one occasion:

‘The Scottish Universities Commission has been issuing some “Ordinances” to which serious objections are taken, and among others a flaw has been found in the Women’s Ordinance, which we want to have remedied. All the objecting bodies were to meet together, so Dr Balfour and I were summoned by enclosed solemn document to appear to represent our School, and it was amusing to find myself an invited delegate, at whose entrance the Chairman rose and came forward with outstretched hand, in the awful University Court Room, where our case had over and over again been tried by a hostile authority, and lost, without an opportunity for a word in our defence. Sir Robert Christison looked down from the wall, and it made me almost chuckle to think what he would have said! Sic transit! How the world moves.’¹⁷

The Court of the University of Edinburgh finally, in 1892, opened its doors to women to enter the Faculty of Arts. Several of the new students had already passed the Certificate of Arts and so eight of them were able to graduate the following year. In 1894, the Court agreed to accept women students for instruction and graduation in the Faculty of Medicine. To celebrate this decision, friends of Dr Jex-Blake presented her with an address of congratulations. Dr Jex-Blake replied by acknowledging the debt that all medical women owed to five men in particular – Dr Balfour, Dr Watson, Professor Calderwood, Professor Masson and the late Mr Russel. Later in the day the students offered their congratulations in the form of an illuminated and illustrated address.¹⁸

A number of students began to study for the MB CM degree, in some cases as well as for the Scottish Triple examinations. The first women graduated in medicine from Glasgow University in 1894 and two years later Jessie McGregor from the Surgeon Square School and Mona Geddes from the Chambers Street College graduated from Edinburgh. Mona Geddes was the niece of Dr Garrett’s husband, AJS Anderson. Sophia Jex-Blake and Elizabeth Garrett had known each other for about 30 years. They were two determined ladies, the one a fighter, the other a conciliator, who admired each other, but with such different temperaments they could never work closely together.

In 1896, the University authorities declared in favour of separate medical classes for men and women. The School was inspected by the university authorities and

was found to be 'completely satisfactory'. However the situation regarding separate classes for women appeared to be somewhat ambivalent, so in April 1898 the School requested clarification from the University Court. It was known that mixed classes for several subjects were held in the Medical College for Women in Chambers Street and other institutions in the city that held medical classes and that the permission to hold these mixed classes was given on an annual basis; parts of the Physiology course were still to be conducted in separate classes. The School insisted on certain classes for women only, on moral grounds, although the smaller classes would be more expensive. There was also a problem with the certificates of attendance of the various classes which should have shown whether they were mixed or separate classes. The committee of the School wrote to the University Court offering their building in Surgeon Square for separate classes. If the offer was accepted the Committee would hand over the provision of the medical scholarships (£2,000) for women.

The reply from the Court was not encouraging. The School was losing students and running into debt again. The committee, therefore, reluctantly decided in August that they could not continue competing with the cheaper classes in the other medical schools such as the Chambers Street College. The School was therefore closed. In September the committee agreed to reimburse students who had already paid their fees in advance.¹⁹

During the twelve years of the School's existence, at least 80 students started courses of whom 33 completed their training there; 31 completed their training elsewhere; apparently 16 did not qualify.

There were still relatively few women doctors in Britain in the late nineteenth century and they were often regarded as incapable of carrying out the tasks expected of their male counterparts. The administrators of women's and children's hospitals were more willing to accept women doctors than were those of general hospitals. Twenty doctors were accepted as missionaries and a further eight worked in government hospitals in India. Dr Jex-Blake would have been proud of all her students, as many of the doctors were proud of having been taught by her.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the School was never in a sound financial position. This was further undermined by the opening of the College in direct competition. The two Colleges in Glasgow naturally drew students from the west of Scotland who might otherwise have chosen Edinburgh.

All the years that Dr Jex-Blake was in Edinburgh, she had run her private practice, the dispensary and the tiny hospital that was attached to it. When she opened her School in 1886, she spent at least one day each week at the School lecturing, also doing administration and spending time with the students to sort out personal problems and any questions connected with their studies. She also underwrote all the expenses of the School.

Dr Jex-Blake had to take six months leave of absence in 1897 due to overwork and exhaustion. After the closing of the School in 1898 she determined to retire. To mark the occasion of her retirement it was particularly appropriate that Professor Masson should speak, as he had been one of Sophia's friends and advocates ever since she had first ventured to Edinburgh in 1869.

Before moving south Dr Jex-Blake conveyed to four trustees the funds collected by herself and others to be used to establish a permanent hospital for women and children. The Bruntsfield Hospital served the women and children of Edinburgh and the surrounding areas until its closure in 1989.²⁰

Sophia Jex-Blake's contribution to the medical education of women was outstanding. She fought two battles with the University of Edinburgh, and although she lost both battles, her aim was eventually achieved. She wrote dozens of letters and articles on the subject, interviewed professors, journalists and lawyers to the detriment of her health and her studies. But she recovered and was the main force behind the opening of the London School of Medicine for Women. Having completed her own medical studies she suffered a further setback when she failed to be appointed Secretary or at least to gain a place on the organising committee there. She picked herself up again and decided to return to Edinburgh. There she set up her plate, opened a small dispensary and an associated hospital in a deprived area of the city. Although the School was a constant source of controversy it was the first such School in Scotland and played an important part in the more general acceptance of women doctors.

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