Elizabeth Blackwell: America's First Woman Doctor

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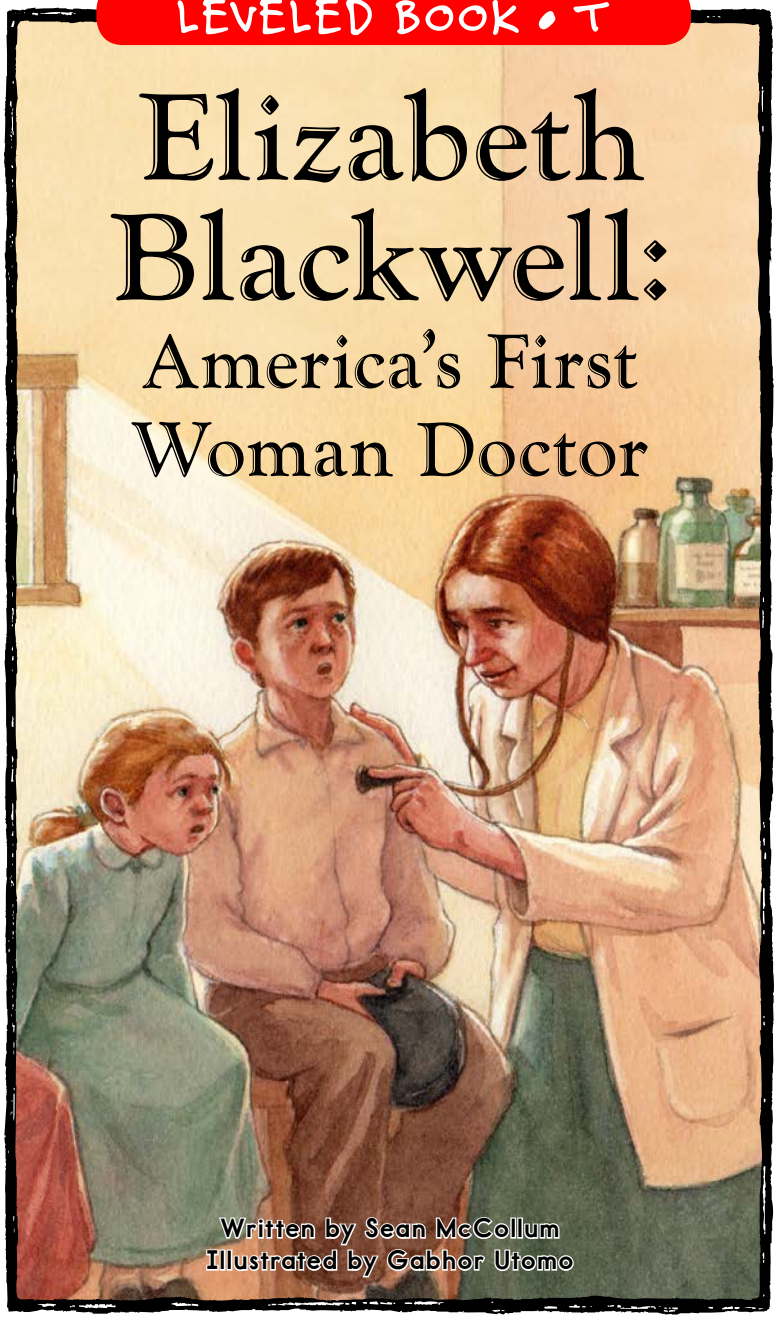
Elizabeth Blackwell: America's First Woman Doctor



Written by Sean McCollum
Illustrated by Gabhor Utomo

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Page 3: Elizabeth Blackwell as a young woman

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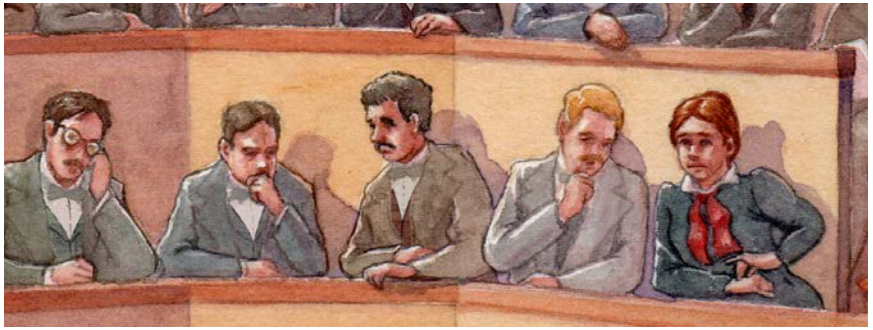


Tough Enough

The professor cut into the dead body while his **medical** students looked on. Some young men in the class blushed. Others looked sick or laughed nervously.

Elizabeth Blackwell was **determined** not to show any emotion. She watched the demonstration closely while pinching her hand as hard as she could. The pain helped her keep her face still. She had to show she was tough enough.

The year was 1847, and Elizabeth was the first woman ever to attend medical college. Most people at the time thought women were too weak and delicate to handle the blood and suffering that doctors sometimes face. She was determined to prove them wrong.

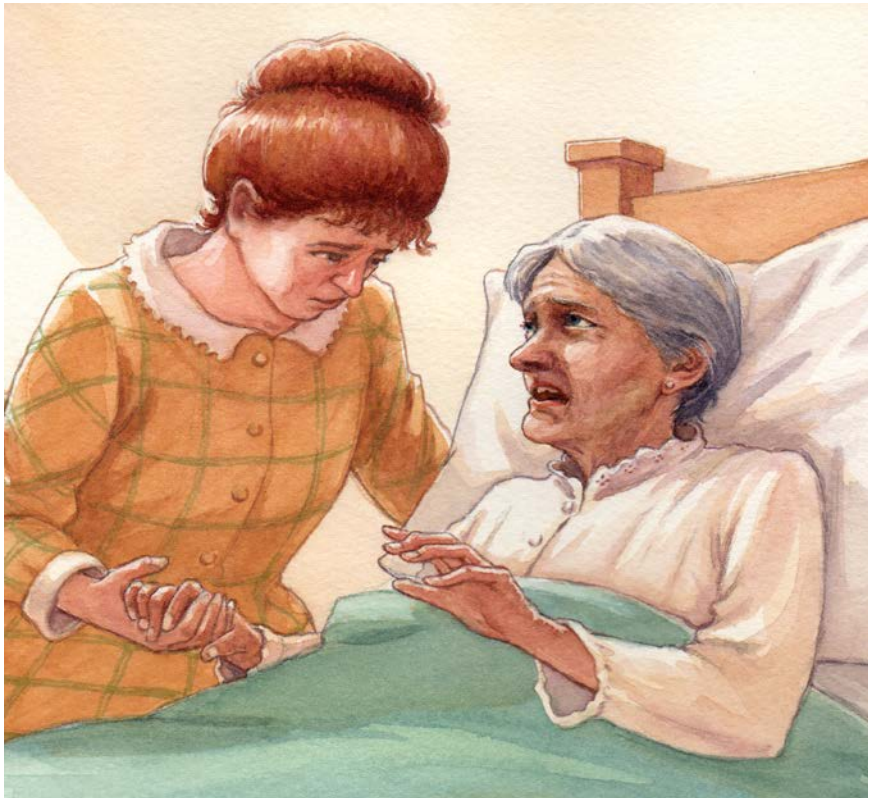
A New Direction

Elizabeth Blackwell was born in England in 1821. She was the second of nine children in a close, loving family. Her parents believed their children—both boys and girls—deserved a good education.

In those days, educated boys could pursue any kind of **career**. Girls, however, were expected to learn the skills for becoming wives and mothers. If they were lucky, they learned to read and write at home.

In 1832, Elizabeth's father moved the family to the United States to start a new business, but bad luck followed them. People who owed Mr. Blackwell money could not repay him. In 1838, he died after a short illness. The family was left heartbroken and poor.

The Blackwells struggled to get by. The boys took jobs. The girls started a school that students paid to attend.



In 1844, a visit to a neighbor changed the direction of Elizabeth's life. The woman was dying. She complained of the awful treatment she had received from male doctors. She was sure that a woman **physician** would better understand her illness. She urged Elizabeth, smart as she was, to train to become a doctor.

At first, Elizabeth **rejected** the idea, but she could not stop thinking about the possibility.

Against the Odds

Today, it is difficult to imagine the limits that American girls and women faced in the 1840s. They could not vote. Fathers, husbands, and brothers controlled almost all businesses, homes, and money.

The Seneca Falls Convention

In July 1848, hundreds of women and men traveled to Seneca Falls, New York. They held a big meeting about winning more rights for women. These included the right to vote and own property. They created their own declaration that echoed the U.S. Declaration of Independence: ". . . all men *and women* are created equal . . ." This was a radical idea for the time.

American women gained the right to vote in 1919. Yet even today, many women still earn less than men for doing the same work—including doctors. A study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* shows that, on average, a male doctor earns $12,000 more a year than a female doctor.

Marchers carry a banner in support of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1976. The ERA would guarantee women equal rights under the U.S. Constitution. It has yet to be adopted.

Unmarried women had few career options. They might find work as nurses or teachers. The idea of a female lawyer or doctor, though, was seen as silly or even crazy. Few men considered women to be their equals in brains or talent.

Instead of discouraging Blackwell, these attitudes drove her to try to become the first woman doctor. She faced three big challenges. First, she had to make enough money to pay for medical school. Second, she needed to learn enough about human biology to be ready for medical studies. Third, she had to find a medical school that would accept a woman.

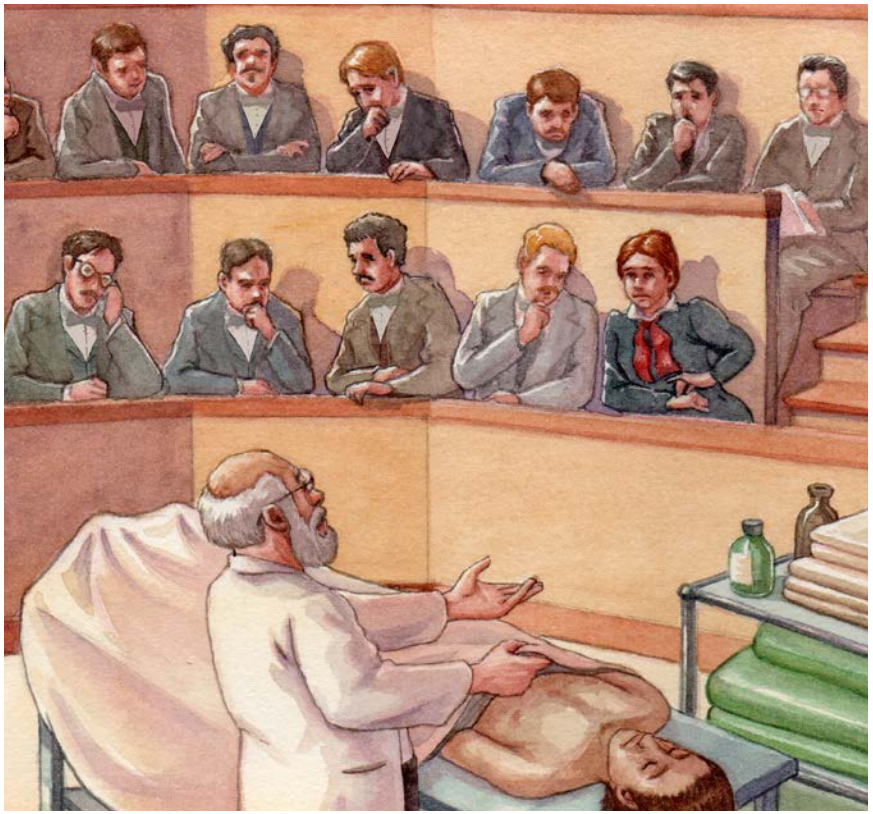
In 1845, Blackwell moved to North Carolina and then South Carolina. She lived with the families of two doctors. She taught music to save money for medical school. When she had time off, she studied the doctors' medical texts.

By 1847, Blackwell felt ready to take on the third challenge. She applied to the best medical colleges in Philadelphia and New York City. She continued to study with helpful doctors—even as sixteen schools rejected her. "Elizabeth, it is of no use trying," one adviser told her.

That October, a letter from Geneva Medical College in western New York arrived. She braced herself for another rejection, but this letter was different. Elizabeth Blackwell had been accepted at last. At 26, she was going to medical school.

"This Is the Way to Learn!"

Blackwell didn't know it, but her acceptance was an accident of sorts. The professors at Geneva Medical College had given students the choice of whether she should be accepted. The professors were sure the all-male class would refuse to accept a woman. Thinking the vote was a joke, the students all voted to admit her.



The faculty were shocked, but the school kept its word. Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman accepted into medical college in the United States.

At first, a few professors did not want her to attend some courses. For example, they thought it was **improper** for her to study male **anatomy**. Blackwell gently but firmly asked that she receive the same training as her male classmates. Her professors and her classmates finally agreed, and her quiet determination and ability soon won everyone's respect. "Oh, this is the way to learn!" she noted in her diary.

On January 23, 1849, she walked across the stage at **graduation**. The president of the medical college handed Elizabeth her diploma and bowed. The local newspaper called it "a scene for a painter" and praised Blackwell's courage.

She had finished first in her class. More importantly, she was now Elizabeth Blackwell, M.D. (Doctor of Medicine).

Champion for Women Doctors

After graduating, Dr. Blackwell sailed to Europe to continue her training. She took a position in a hospital in Paris. Soon after arriving, she had a life-changing accident. A baby she was caring for had an eye **infection**. Blackwell was cleaning it when some water squirted in her face. Her eyes became infected, too.

Doctors had to remove Blackwell's left eye, and she had to wear a glass eye for the rest of her life. At one time, she had been interested in becoming a surgeon, but her bad eyesight now made that impossible.

Doctor and Mother

Elizabeth Blackwell had suitors but prized her independence too much to marry. However, in 1854 she adopted an orphan, Katharine Barry, known as Kitty. They lived together until Blackwell's death.

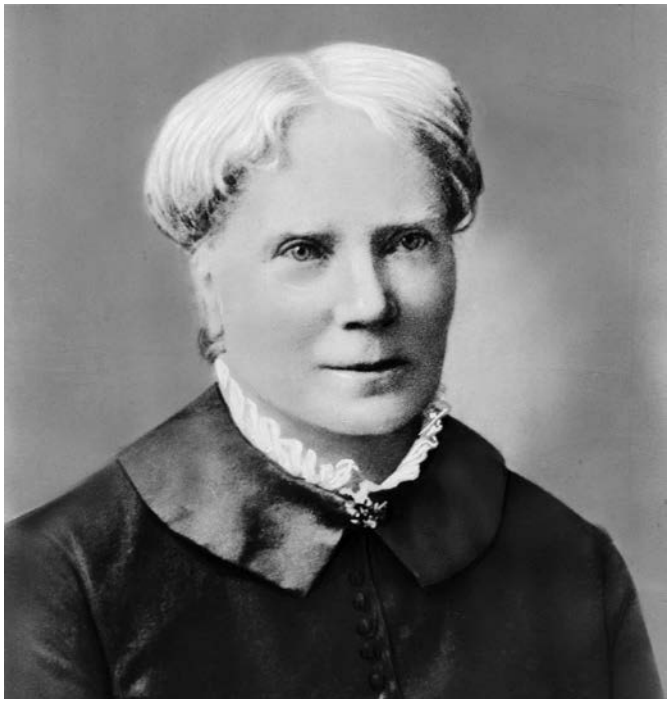
Blackwell didn't let her misfortune stop her, though. She returned to the United States in 1851 and set up an office in New York City. She barely made enough money to eat. Most of her patients were from poor families that had recently moved to the city from Germany and Ireland. Though sometimes they could not pay, she treated her sick patients anyway. She also taught them about healthy eating and good *hygiene*—keeping clean and not spreading disease.

As she worked, an idea formed in her mind. What if she set up her own hospital run by women doctors? In 1857, she established a small hospital for poor women and children in New York City. She was joined by her sister Emily, who had recently become the second woman doctor in the United States. Now women had a place to continue their medical training.

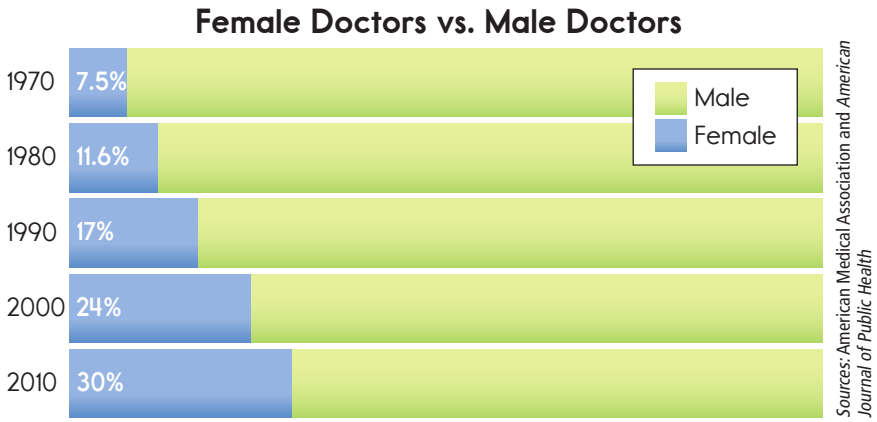
Thank You, Dr. Blackwell

Dr. Blackwell continued to see and treat patients. More and more, though, she devoted her time to promoting medical education for women in the United States and England.

In November 1868, Blackwell and her sister opened the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary. It was one of the first medical schools where women were welcomed without doubts or questions.



Elizabeth Blackwell near the time of her retirement



Few women became doctors until the last four decades. By 2012, more than a third of doctors in the United States were women, and nearly half of the students graduating from medical school were women.

A year later, Dr. Blackwell moved back to England. She continued to practice medicine there until her retirement in 1877. Afterward, she gave speeches about hygiene and living a moral life. She wrote books to teach girls and women better ways to protect their health.

By the time she died in 1910, there were almost 7,400 women doctors in the United States. Today, more than one in every three U.S. doctors is a woman. They practice every kind of medicine. They treat children, save lives in emergency rooms, and do brain surgery. Elizabeth Blackwell's brave efforts opened the door for all the women doctors who have followed in her footsteps.

Glossary

anatomy *(n.)* a branch of science that studies the physical structure of living things; the parts that make up the physical structure of a living thing (p. 11)

career *(n.)* a job or profession that a person has over a long period of time, usually with opportunities for advancement or greater success (p. 5)

determined *(adj.)* having one's mind made up to do something (p. 4)

graduation *(n.)* the ceremony at which one receives a diploma or degree from a school (p. 11)

improper *(adj.)* not correct, suitable, or appropriate (p. 11)

infection *(n.)* an illness caused by microbes (p. 12)

medical *(adj.)* of or related to the treatment of injuries or illness (p. 4)

physician *(n.)* a medical doctor (p. 6)

rejected *(v.)* refused or denied (p. 6)