

THE ONTARIO MEDICAL COLLEGE FOR WOMEN, 1883 to 1906:

LESSONS FROM GENDER-SEPARATISM IN MEDICAL EDUCATION*

Lykke de la Cour and Rose Sheinin

Une école de médecine pour l'usage exclusif des femmes fut établi à Toronto en 1883 afin de surmonter la discrimination qui confrontait des femmes dans cette profession à la fin du XIX^e siècle en Canada. L'école de médecine des femmes (the Woman's Medical College), qui est devenu en 1894 l'école ontarienne de médecine des femmes (the Ontario Medical College for Women), fut crée afin de fournir aux étudiantes une éducation médicale égale mais séparée. L'école espérait faciliter l'entrée des femmes en médecine en éliminant les obstacles qu'elles affrontaient comme étudiantes. Les auteures examinent l'approche séparatiste dans l'éducation médicale à cette école d'où 111 femmes ont été diplômé au cours de ses vingt-trois ans d'existence.

Women pursuing a career in medicine in Canada during the late nineteenth century faced numerous obstacles. Foremost was accessing appropriate education. Most existing medical schools refused to admit female students. At the Toronto School of Medicine and the Medical Faculty of Queen's University, where limited enrolment was finally granted to women in the 1870s and early 1880s respectively, the attitudes and experiences encountered were hostile. Obnoxious behaviour and derogatory comments regarding female physicians put unpleasant, as well as unwarranted, stress on female students. Pressure from male students and faculty ultimately resulted in the re-imposition of bans on women at both medical schools by 1883.¹

Demands for education in medicine for women finally resulted, in the Fall of 1883, in the establishment of the Kingston Women's Medical College and the Women's Medical College, Toronto. These schools were designed to provide female students with 'equal but separate' medical education. The former was linked to Queen's University, the latter to the University of Trinity College.² In this article, the history of the Woman's Medical College, Toronto, in advancing the

cause of women in medicine, is examined in the light of an operative strategy of educational separatism. The Toronto college, which in 1894 became the Ontario Medical College for Women, had significant implications for female medical students, women in the profession, as well as women in the community, and must be evaluated accordingly.

On October 1, 1883, the Woman's Medical College, Toronto, opened in a small building at 227 Sumach Street. While annual reports issued by the College boasted of lecture rooms, anatomical and physiological museums, a chemical laboratory, and a dissecting room "well supplied with subjects," in reality facilities were quite meagre at first.³ Faculty repeatedly had to assure guests to the School that the word 'college' indeed was not a misprint for 'cottage.' The chemistry department was "portable." The museum doubled as a janitor's bedroom and heating left much to be desired during the winter months. But as one visitor to the College noted: "All this was nothing in comparison with the fact that here at last girls had an opportunity to study medicine."⁴

Initially, responses to the opportunity afforded by a women's medical school were few. Only three women enrolled for the first session of classes; two were reportedly daughters of friends of one of the founding professors.⁵ Enrolment over the next five years averaged four new students per year.⁶ In the late 1880s attendance increased substantially, such that twenty women registered for first year studies by the Fall of 1888; eleven registered in the following year. By December 1889 plans were underway to erect new premises for the College. A Professor at the school was confidently writing to a supporter: "Evidently the College has taken root, and I have very little doubt but its success will be greater year by year."⁷ In the fall of 1890 the College moved to a large new building at 291 Sumach Street, where facilities were greatly expanded. The school now

housed a lecture hall capable of seating over fifty students, microscopical and chemical laboratories and reading rooms. The old College building became a dissecting room.

The Woman's Medical College, Toronto, was never empowered to grant degrees, but it qualified female students to sit the medical examinations at Trinity College, Victoria and Toronto Universities. Lectures and demonstrations were given at the College. Clinical instruction was provided through arrangements established with the major Toronto hospitals – Toronto General, the Hospital for Sick Children and St. Michael's. "Special Hours" in the public wards were designated specifically for female students. Separate post-mortum classes were conducted and segregated seating was provided in the operating theatres.⁸

Although special attention was given to ensuring that the curriculum provided was identical to that offered in medical schools for men, several features of instruction at the Woman's Medical College were unique to the institution and the medical education of women. Emphasis was placed on courses deemed "of the utmost importance to women practitioners" – gynaecology, obstetrics, and the diseases of children.⁹ In an attempt to provide students with added practical experience in obstetrics, a midwifery service was established by the College in 1891. Under the supervision of the Lecturer in Obstetrics and an Assistant Accoucheur, students provided women in the community with pre- and post-natal care and attended home births.¹⁰ A Dispensary for Women was created in 1898 by Drs. Ida Lynd, Jennie Gray and Susanna Boyle, graduates of the Woman's Medical College. As instructors of the College, they offered students essential clinical experience, while providing for the needs of women in the community. In the dispensary women in their primary years of medical studies received instruction in dispensing and pharmacy, while female

students in their final years assisted in clinic activities.¹¹

Thus, in the process of educating women physicians, the Woman's Medical College, Toronto, initiated health care services novel for the times – medical treatment for women by members of their own sex. Furthermore, as indicated in the College's reports and references in medical journals, the midwifery and dispensary clinics were utilized most by poor and working-class women. Maternity care was provided by the school for a fee of fifty cents,¹² considerably less than the usual rate charged by most male physicians. C. Lesley Biggs noted that, in the 1870s, doctors were billing five dollars to attend home births.¹³ Although poor women in Toronto could use the Burnside Lying-in Hospital in the late nineteenth century, few did so, according to studies on childbirth in Ontario. Social conditions and fear of puerperal fever, associated with hospitals, often kept women away.¹⁴ It is difficult to ascertain how many

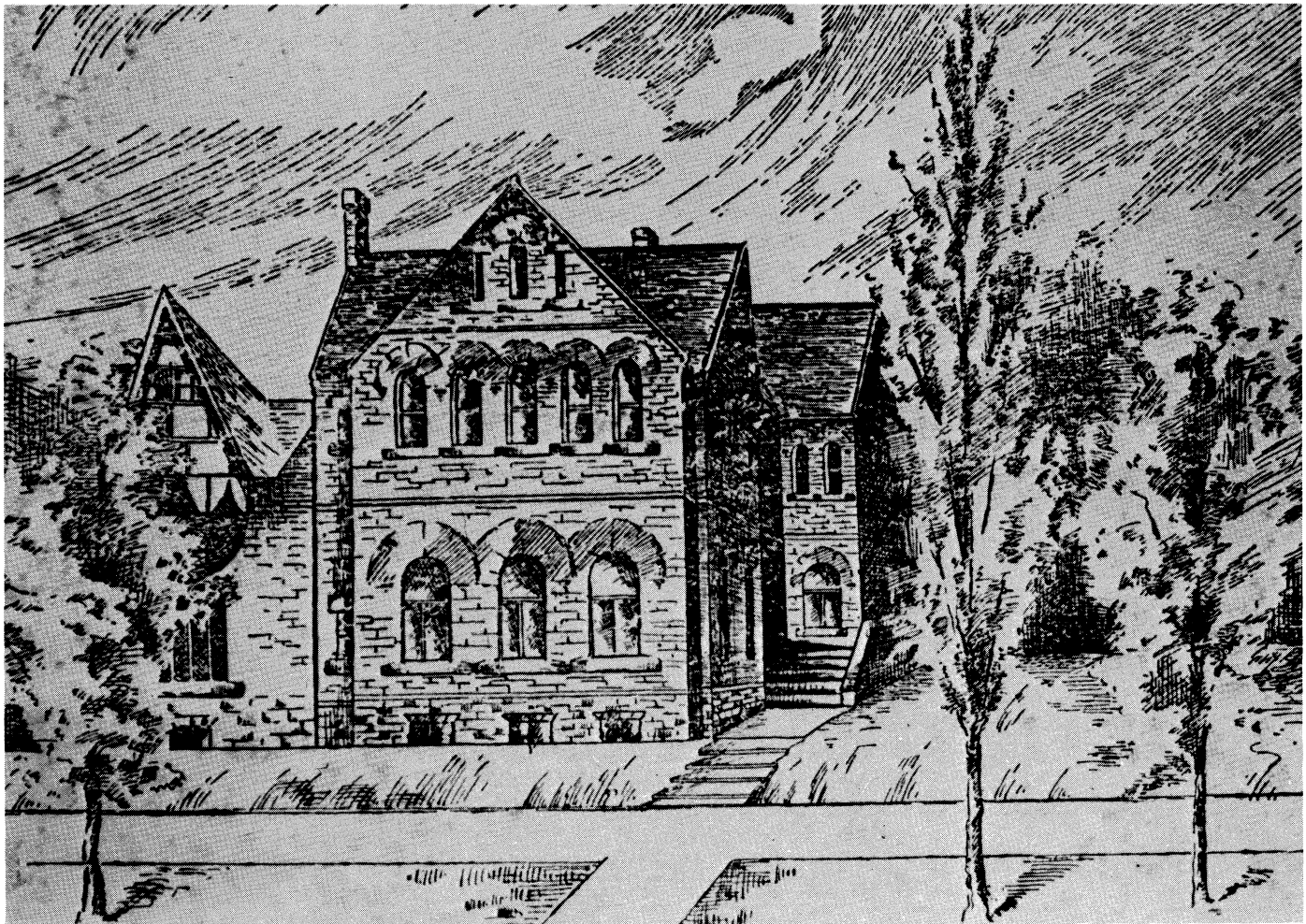
expectant mothers actually took advantage of the College's maternity program. Only one Annual Report listed utilization rates: it showed that over a one year period in 1898-1899, sixty women used this service.¹⁵

The Women's Dispensary, on the other hand, appears to have had a high volume of patients, especially considering the facilities and staffing available. In the first year of operation, 1898-99, clinics were held three days per week and approximately 1,200 treatments were handled. Increased attendance necessitated the expansion of clinics to six days per week in 1900. By 1903-1904, Annual Reports recorded over 7,500 dispensary treatments.¹⁶ As with the maternity service, special financial accommodations were made for women unable to pay. Medical advice was given free of charge and medicaments dispensed for only a "nominal" fee.¹⁷

Funding for the Woman's Medical College, Toronto, came primarily from

donations and students' fees. Finances, even in the best of times, were a constant source of difficulty. Faculty were not paid for most of the twenty-three years of the College's existence.¹⁸ Apparently, any surplus funds were used to expand and improve facilities.

In 1894 the school experienced a financial crisis. While enrolment had continued to average eleven new students per year, several donations promised for the upcoming session did not materialize.¹⁹ In a bid to save the College, a major reorganization was undertaken: the school became a joint stock company, with seventeen faculty members each subscribing one thousand dollars which they held in stock. The name of the College, now incorporated, was changed to the Ontario Medical College for Women (Limited).²⁰ These actions coincided with the closing of the Kingston Women's Medical School. Faltering enrolments, as well as financial difficulties, had made it impossible for the Kingston college to continue. With only



The Ontario Medical College for Women, 291 Sumach Street, Toronto

Credit: Women's College Hospital Archives

one women's medical school in Canada and a new financial basis, the Toronto College was optimistic about the future. In its report for 1896, the school announced that:

... a new interest has been awakened in the College, and many applications for information have been addressed to the Board giving conclusive evidence that the hopes upon which the Directors based the reorganization were on a solid foundation.²¹

Unfortunately, optimism at the College was short-lived. Despite the measures taken in 1894, economic problems persisted. The financial report for the year ending 1901 showed the school operating at a loss.²² In addition, enrolment was beginning to decline. After peaking in 1895 with eighteen new first-year students, numbers steadily dropped. From 1901 to 1905, first-year enrolment averaged only six new students per year. The reason for the decline was simple – yet ominous for the future of the women's college. At long last, medical faculties of American and Canadian universities were beginning to admit women to co-educational programmes. In 1895 the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore opened enrolment to female medical students, as did Cornell in 1899. By the early 1900s Canadian universities such as Western, Dalhousie and the University of Manitoba were graduating women in medicine.

The demise of the Ontario Medical College for Women was, in a sense, inherent in its origins as a facility for equal but separate medical education for women. Although the College was affiliated with the Trinity College University from 1884 to 1906, there is not one single reference to the women's school in a comprehensive history of the Trinity Medical College written by G. Spragge.²³ In theory and practice the future women physicians were nurtured and mentored separately and distinctly from their male colleagues. By the early 1900s students at the Ontario Medical College for Women were increasingly questioning the logic of a university system which would permit women to sit their medical examinations under university auspices, yet ban them from the classrooms.²⁴ Although official regulations still barred women from studying medicine at the university, several had begun to attend medical classes in 1904 and 1905. Academic concerns were also being raised by the female students.

Dr. R.B. Nevitt, Dean of the Ontario Medical College for Women, reported in 1905:

The women feel that as present situated they have not an equal opportunity with the men of becoming acquainted with the idiosyncracies of examiners, and that this loss influences their competitive standing.²⁵

In 1905, as a result of the economic and enrolment problems, directors and faculty at the Ontario Medical College for Women proposed the creation of a Faculty of Medicine for Women at the University of Toronto. They suggested that female students use all university facilities, but that their classes should continue to be segregated and taught by a separate faculty. According to the proposal, eleven instructors from the Ontario Medical College for Women (six women and five men) would form the new faculty. Dr. Augusta Stowe-Gullen was recommended for the position of Dean of Women.²⁶ The University rejected this suggestion completely and instead announced: "the Faculty of Medicine . . . is now prepared to register female students."²⁷

In the spring of 1906 the Ontario Medical College for Women closed and female medical students transferred to the University of Toronto. With the closing of the College, Dr. Stowe-Gullen prepared a brief history of the school wherein she concluded:

... let us feel no sorrow at the order of procedure . . . The spirit of the age is monopolistic. Small medical, or preparatory colleges, are not consonant with prevailing thought, and their death knell has been sounded. It is conceded that the interests of the student, the profession, and the public, are best attained by university life, and university training. The greater facilities afforded, concentration of work, combined with a reduction of expenditure in time and energy, constitutes an alluring academic picture; and compensates for the loss of personal interest.²⁸

But were the interests of female students, women in the profession, and women in the community, best served with the closing of the school? For women students and those in the profession, the closing of the women's medical school had particular and important ramifications. As Veronica Strong-Boag noted, the decline in the number of female physicians in the early twentieth century "was not unrelated to the closing of the Ontario

Medical College for Women."²⁹ Quotas on female enrolment, discrimination in admission criteria, lack of adequate financial support, lack of positive reinforcement in career plans, as well as unpleasant and prejudicial attitudes in university classrooms, resulted not only in decreased numbers of female medical students but also in deteriorated conditions of study.

Dr. Elizabeth Stewart, who graduated from the Faculty of Medicine in 1907, remembered women students as being "cordially hated" at the University of Toronto. Out of ten women with whom she began medical studies, only four reached graduation.³⁰ At the Ontario Medical College for Women, six out of every ten students graduated. Women students also lost exposure to female role models when they transferred to the University. Women physicians had instructed students at the college and dispensary. Although the Women's Dispensary continued to operate after the closing of the school, student involvement declined. Thus, emerging women doctors were faced exclusively with male teachers and mentors – many of whom were actively opposed to women in the medical profession.

For women physicians, the closing of the College represented a loss of opportunities for practical experience. Female doctors formed nearly thirty per cent of the total teaching staff at the Ontario Medical College for Women, whereas there were no female professors of medicine at the University of Toronto. Although staff on the faculty of the Ontario Medical College for Women never received salaries and women were given lesser positions as lecturers, demonstrators, and department assistants (few ever reached the professorial level), the psychological and practical benefits in terms of the teaching and clinical experience provided by the College, nevertheless was of significance when no other medical schools would hire female physicians.

Women in the community also experienced losses as a result of the closing of the Ontario Medical College for Women. The midwifery service of the Obstetrics Department was lost when the school closed. Fortunately, the Women's Dispensary continued to operate as an independent institution and was eventually transformed into the Women's College Hospital in 1911.

From 1883 to 1906 the Women's Medical College, Toronto and the Ontario Medical College for Women served the professional and educational needs of women in medicine through the only strategy available to them at the time, that of 'equal but separate' medical education. During this period they graduated 111 female physicians. The impact of these women's medical schools on female members of the profession and on women's health was of significance. But what of their effect on medical education and the practice of medicine generally?

The Ontario Medical College for Women appeared at the time to have little impact on the medical profession. Restrictive policies on female enrolment in medical programs at the University were removed through pressure exerted by women students themselves. Women entering medical training after 1906, as students in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Toronto, were faced once again by male faculty and students who expressed hostile attitudes towards them. Hospitals and medical faculties persistently refused to appoint women to staff positions, despite the growth in the number of female doctors.

Notwithstanding, the Toronto and Kingston women's medical colleges were key events in the evolution of the medical profession in Canada. Together with the Women's Suffrage Movement, the movement for higher education, the earliest women physicians, the graduates of the women's medical schools, and the few men who fought for co-education, the colleges stimulated the development of full and equal education for women in all disciplines including medical science. Moreover, the women's medical colleges helped lay the foundation in a number of important branches of public health and preventive medicine by providing the early medical training of women who would pioneer in these fields. While gender-separatism in medical education did not erode all the obstacles confronting women in medicine, it nevertheless marks the permanent entry and presence of women in the medical professions.

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There is something not quite
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in the colour of this man's voice.
He is out of tune/misinformed.
I am not like that.
I am not.

He calls me Joan of Arc/
Lady MacBeth,
says I am Mary Magdelene/
Mother Mary.
He calls me a brilliant star.
I am not.

I am a woman too distant
at times/
too intimate. My intimacy is
immediate/almost cruel.
His women
are not more beautiful but
less real.

I am beautiful for my realness.

This is not the stuff he would
make
dreams of. My poetry does
not feather
comfortable pillows. This man's
stars are
distant/safe, the rays of light
cooling
through years of space.

He will need many stars
to people
his nights with brilliance.
I will not.
I am a real woman/just at hand.
He would burn with my touch.

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