

Women Physicians and the Suffrage Movement

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ABSTRACT

Women physicians have a long history of advocacy, dating to the 19th century women's suffrage movement. As history recounts the work of the suffragists, many women physicians bear mention. Some were leaders on the national scene, and others led suffrage efforts in their own state. In this article, we provide a snapshot of 7 prominent suffragists who were also physicians: Mary Edwards Walker, Mary Putnam Jacobi, Esther Pohl Lovejoy, Marie Equi, Mattie E. Coleman, Cora Smith Eaton, and Caroline E. Spencer. In sharing their stories, we hope to better understand some of the challenges and struggles of the suffrage movement and how their advocacy paved the way not only for women's voting rights but also the role of women physicians as advocates for change.

INTRODUCTION

This year marks the centenary of the 19th Amendment, granting women the constitutional right to vote. The first women's rights convention took place in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. This same period also marked the formal entrance of women into the medical profession. In 1849, Dr Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to earn her medical degree, from Geneva Medical College. The decades that followed would witness a growth in both movements. Many women physicians were active in the fight for suffrage, and some even assumed leadership roles, devoting their lives to the cause. As pioneers in a profession dominated by men, it is not surprising that these women advocated for equality on behalf of their own sex. Many were also proponents of temperance, public health reform, or reproductive rights. This article highlights a few of these trailblazing women and their varied paths to activism.

WOMEN PHYSICIAN SUFFRAGISTS

Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919): Civil War Surgeon

Dr Mary Edwards Walker was a surgeon, activist, and leading suffragist. She was the second woman to graduate from Syracuse Medical College in 1855. She married a fellow medical student and together they opened a practice, but neither the marriage nor the practice were to last.¹ Dr Walker is best known for her work as a civilian contract surgeon during the Civil War. While crossing enemy lines to provide medical care to civilians, she was captured by Confederate forces and imprisoned for 4 months. For her heroism, she was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1865 and to date is the only woman to have received that honor.¹ Dr Walker also advocated for dress reform and was known

for wearing masculine clothing, arguing that it made her duties easier.¹ She ran twice for Congress, albeit unsuccessfully,² and ardently supported women's suffrage, although she felt that a constitutional amendment was unnecessary. Since the phrase, "We the People," was not gendered, she believed that the Constitution had already granted women the right to vote and instead argued for legislation to allow women to exercise that right.³ Sadly, Dr Walker died in 1919, just 1 year before the passage of the 19th Amendment.

Mary Putnam Jacobi (1842-1906): Champion for Menstruating Women

Dr Mary Putnam Jacobi was one of the preeminent women physicians of her generation and also a writer and suffragist. She obtained medical degrees in both the US and Paris, France, and became a professor at the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary. Her father, the well-known publisher George Putnam, was wary of her pursuit of medicine but remained a staunch supporter of her endeavors.⁴ In 1876, she won Harvard's esteemed Boylston Prize for her essay, "The Question of Rest for Women during Menstruation," which debunked claims that menstruation rendered women unfit "for any responsible effort of mind, and ... body also."⁵

Dr Jacobi became active in the suffrage movement in 1893 when a women's suffrage amendment to the New York State Constitution was proposed.⁶ Delivering a powerful address at the Constitutional Convention, Dr Jacobi argued that women should not be considered a "dependent class" given their work in many industries and their status as property owners, taxpayers, and professionals (including physicians, teachers, and journalists). "*Why should not the*

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women have the right to speak for themselves, and by their own mouths to make their own wants known?"⁷ Although the suffrage amendment she pushed for failed to pass, an expanded version of the address was published as a book, *"Common Sense" Applied to Woman Suffrage*.⁷ Dr Jacobi continued to work for women's suffrage and that same year, she co-founded the League for Political Education. At the time of her death, she had written more than 115 medical articles and 9 books.⁶ So great was her dedication to medical science that after being diagnosed with a brain tumor, she wrote an account of her symptoms, which was published posthumously, titled "Early Symptoms of the Meningeal Tumor Compressing the Cerebellum. From Which the Writer Died. Written by Herself."⁷

Marie Equi (1872-1952): "Rebellious Soul"

Dr Marie Equi was a physician and radical political activist who lived openly as a lesbian. She attended medical school at the University of Oregon in one of the first classes to admit women.⁸ After graduating in 1903, Dr Equi set up a practice in Portland, Oregon, where she served working-class women and children and became active in campaigns for birth control, women's suffrage, and overall improvement in the rights of women. She viewed these issues as connected to a "larger class struggle, the end of which would be the freedom, dignity, and health of working women and their families."⁸ Margaret Sanger, a fellow birth control advocate, described Dr Equi as a "rebellious soul."⁸

Dr Equi worked alongside Abigail Scott Duniway, a suffrage leader in Oregon, and frequently found herself at odds with Dr Anna Shaw about the preferred tactics for achieving suffrage.⁹ She also brought an awareness of marketing to the suffrage movement, once staging an "all-suffrage wedding" at which the bride "vowed to cherish rather than obey her future husband."⁹ Finally, in 1912, Dr Equi saw Oregon pass women's suffrage after 5 failed referendums.⁸

In 1914, the Congressional Union separated from the National American Woman Suffrage Association with the goal of pressuring Congress to pass the federal amendment.⁹ The chair of the Oregon branch of the Union excluded Dr Equi as a delegate for the National Convention of Women Voters because of her radical politics.⁹ Dr Equi attended anyway. She was credentialed and granted a seat, but the Oregon contingent had her removed by vote. After the convention, Dr Equi sued the Oregon chair for slander and libel, "demanding a voice even for radical suffragists."⁹ The lawsuit was ultimately dismissed.

Esther Clayton Pohl Lovejoy (1869-1967): Public Health Pioneer

Dr Esther Pohl Lovejoy was a leader in public health reform, politics, and suffrage in Portland, Oregon. In 1907,

after 2 years serving on the Portland Board of Health, she was elected as Portland's City Health Officer.¹⁰ Dr Pohl Lovejoy's public health and policy experiences informed her approach to women's suffrage. She believed that women's suffrage was vital for the promotion of healthy communities because women were more likely to be concerned with the health and well-being of families and children. In one speech, she countered the argument about suffrage being outside the women's sphere¹¹:

And now we come to the mooted question of Woman's Sphere. It is delightfully entertaining to listen to a gentleman anti-suffragist—especially if he happens to be a Doctor of Divinity—rhapsodize upon Woman's Sphere. The woman that he conjures up is a poetic creation of the imagination. How she does rock the cradle! It's a wonder her baby doesn't die of sea-sickness! She never washes dishes or peels [sic] potatoes, or feeds the chickens, or goes to market or engages in any gross and material occupation. She just rocks the cradle from morning until night! That is her strong suit. It is her one manifestation of life! She is a woman of one instinct—one idea—one possibility—and it is easy to believe any Right Reverend Doctor of Divinity who predicts that such a creature will forsake that over-worked cradle on the first opportunity and rush to the polls with a ballot in her hand and vote and vote and vote and do nothing else for the rest of her life but vote.... But the normal woman in her natural sphere—the home—who lets her baby sleep while she does her house-work will find time on election day to vote for the things that will influence the welfare of that home and that baby. A pure water and food supply if she lives in the city.

As a leader in the Oregon suffrage movement, Dr Pohl Lovejoy built coalitions between diverse suffrage groups. Ultimately, she formed her own suffrage organization, Everybody's Equal Suffrage League, with the goal of being "free from all cliques and class distinctions and open to all."¹²

Despite her extensive leadership in the suffrage movement, Dr Pohl Lovejoy continued to work as a physician, maintaining a private practice in obstetrics and gynecology. She even incorporated a medical perspective into her suffrage work, inviting members of suffrage organizations to a dinner with invitations "in the form of a prescription signed by Dr Pohl."¹² After Oregon passed women's suffrage in 1912, Dr Pohl Lovejoy served on the National American Woman Suffrage Association legislative committee as the Oregon congressional representative. She traveled to France during World War I to study the needs of women and children affected by war.¹³ In 1920, she ran (unsuccessfully) for Congress in Oregon's Third District.¹² She then returned to war-related humanitarian work through the American Women's Hospitals, a program that she would lead for the next several decades.

Mattie E. Coleman (1870-1943): "Building Biracial Alliances"

Dr Mattie E. Coleman was one of Tennessee's first female physicians. She married a minister in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in 1902 and subsequently graduated from Meharry Medical College in 1906. After receiving her medical degree, Dr Coleman opened her own practice and dedicated much of her effort to helping those in need, a reflection of her strong Christian beliefs. She was elected President of the Clarksville District Missionary Society, through which she influenced others to do the same through "gospel work."¹⁴ Dr Coleman took on an active role in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, eventually becoming President of the Woman's Connectional Missionary Council, a position that she held for more than 2 decades. She empowered women of all colors to unite and work together. Known for "building biracial alliances," which was unusual at the time, Dr Coleman worked with white women leaders who supported social service programs for the African American community.¹⁵ In return, Dr Coleman helped secure a block of votes by influencing more than 2500 black women to vote in the 1919 Nashville, Tennessee, municipal elections, the first time women in Tennessee were granted the right to vote in municipal elections.¹⁵

Cora Smith Eaton (1867-1939): Climbing for Equity

Dr Cora Eaton's participation in the suffrage movement began at a young age when she followed in the footsteps of her mother, a women's rights advocate. In 1890, she and her mother were among the first women to vote in a local election in Grand Forks, North Dakota, a state which allowed women limited voting rights in a special school election.¹⁶ Two years later, Dr Eaton became the first licensed female physician in North Dakota and in 1895 became the President of the North Dakota Suffrage Association. The following year, she moved to Minneapolis, where she served as a surgeon at the Minneapolis Maternity Hospital and President of the Minnesota Suffrage Association.¹⁷

Eventually, Dr Eaton moved to Washington State, where she played a major role in the successful 1910 state suffrage ratification campaign. She established the National Council of Women Voters, a nonpartisan group composed of women from voting states, separate in organization and goals from the National American Woman Suffrage Association. She was also the physician of Alice Paul, one of the most prominent leaders in the suffrage movement. When Paul was imprisoned for picketing at the White House, Dr Eaton helped smuggle notes in and out of the infamous Occoquan Workhouse prison.¹⁸

While practicing in the Pacific Northwest, Dr Eaton took on yet another challenge: mountaineering. She was the first woman to climb the East Peak of Mount Olympus, no

doubt with the same determination and grit that fueled her leadership in the suffrage movement.¹⁸ In 1909, she joined a group of suffragists to climb Mount Rainier and on reaching the summit, raised a "Votes for Women" banner.¹⁸ This act embodies the passion and dedication that Dr Eaton brought to the cause for women's suffrage.

Caroline E. Spencer (1861-1928): Silent Sentinel

Dr Caroline E. Spencer was a physician activist who advocated for the elimination of the economic and political inequalities American women faced. After graduating from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1892, she moved to Colorado, where she became a focal point of the state's suffragist movement. She helped found the Women's Club of Colorado Springs in 1902 and the Civic League in 1909.¹⁹

As her prominence in political advocacy grew, Dr Spencer expanded her work to the national level, becoming a leader in Alice Paul's National Women's Party, an organization that employed militant tactics in its mission to achieve women's suffrage on a federal level.²⁰ As one of the Silent Sentinels, a suffrage group organized by Alice Paul and the National Women's Party, she picketed in front of the White House during the years 1917 to 1919.²¹ In 1919, she also demonstrated at the Watch Fires for Justice, where President Wilson's speeches were burned.²¹ Dr Spencer's banner during one of President Wilson's speeches read, "Mr. President, what will you do for women's suffrage?"²¹ She was arrested 3 times and sent to prison twice, once for 7 months because of repeat offenses for her protesting.²¹ After the successful passage of the 19th Amendment, Dr Spencer continued her advocacy with the National Women's Party to pass the Equal Rights Amendment and continued in this line of work until her death in 1928.¹⁹

ONE CENTURY LATER

The women's suffrage movement marks a pivotal time in American history in the promotion of autonomy and equality for American women. Female physicians played an important role in these efforts. Familiar with the challenges of being among the first in their field, they were courageous, passionate advocates and leaders with deep conviction. These women demonstrated flexibility and creativity, adapting their strategies to address the changing concerns of their communities, each drawing from her own personal background and strengths. Yet the history of suffrage is not without controversy. Although biracial alliances existed in Tennessee, most efforts remained largely segregated, and sometimes the tactics included racist or anti-immigrant rhetoric.

As we celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the 19th Amendment, we should remember that our success as a

society lies in embracing diversity—learning from and giving voice to groups that have historically been silenced. And just as suffrage leaders shifted from quiet discourse to a rallying cry to achieve their goals, so too must we join with allies to achieve equity for our patients and for ourselves. May we learn from their history even as we work in this century to advance women’s leadership at all levels of healthcare and in society at large. ❖

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