Lesson 11

Elizabeth Blackwell, M.D.

In the early 1800s a woman in the United States had few rights. She was not allowed to vote; that would not happen for a hundred years. She was not allowed to own property; if she married, everything she possessed became the property of her husband. And if she wanted to work, she soon learned that careers in medicine or law were not considered appropriate for women; only men were admitted to medical or law schools. Most people regarded this as a perfectly normal state of affairs. But Elizabeth Blackwell was not one of them.

Born in England in 1821, Blackwell came to America as a young girl with her parents. Later, when she expressed a desire to become a doctor, her parents and friends told her to put aside such fanciful ideas because it would be futile for her to try to get into medical school. But Blackwell was resolute in her determination. She studied medicine privately and began applying to medical schools. Despite one rejection after another, she persevered.

One of the places to which she applied was the Geneva Medical School in western New York, now part of Syracuse University. The professors there were just as prejudiced as those at other medical schools and were quite ready to reject her application. However, in the belief that a majority would be against Blackwell’s admission, they decided to let the students vote. Just to be sure, they ruled that a single no vote would exclude her. To the professors’ surprise, the students unanimously voted yes. Blackwell later found out that they had done it as a joke. That had no effect on the result, however, and the professors grudgingly accepted her as a student.

In 1847 Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman in America to be admitted to medical school. Life in the classroom, however, was uncomfortable for her at first. Some students found it amusing to throw paper darts at her, touch her hair, and make offensive remarks about her in her presence. Blackwell responded to the sneers and bullying with a dignified silence, and the unruly behavior soon ended, to the relief of the more serious students. Blackwell worked hard, earned the respect of the faculty, and received high marks in all her courses. She graduated at the top of her class on January 23, 1849.
Not only had Blackwell become a Doctor of Medicine with the right to put the **abbreviation** *M.D.* after her name, she had also entered the history books as the first woman in the United States to do so. Her younger sister Emily followed in Elizabeth’s footsteps and also became a doctor. Together they established the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. During the Civil War Blackwell trained nurses to tend the wounded. Most of all, her courage in challenging tradition **inspired** other women and opened up the medical profession to them. By the end of the century, over seven thousand women were practicing medicine in the United States.

**Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.**

1. What effect did Blackwell’s life and career have on other women?

2. What is the relationship of the letters *N.Y.I.W.C.* to the New York Infirmary for Women and Children?

3. How much property was a woman required to turn over to her husband when she married?

4. How were women **excluded** from the political process?

5. Why do you think so few women demanded changes in the way they were treated?

6. Why might Blackwell’s desire to become a doctor have shocked some people?
7. What is the meaning of **fanciful** as it is used in the passage?
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___________________________________________________________________

8. How did Blackwell feel when she encountered obstacles to becoming a doctor?
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___________________________________________________________________

9. Why do you think Blackwell’s applications to medical schools were rejected?
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___________________________________________________________________

10. How was Blackwell’s **perseverance** rewarded?
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___________________________________________________________________

11. What is the meaning of **unruly** as it is used in the passage?
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___________________________________________________________________

12. Why did the professors insist that the vote on Blackwell’s admission be **unanimous**?
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13. What is the meaning of **majority** as it is used in the passage?
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___________________________________________________________________

14. What form did the bullying by the male medical students take?
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___________________________________________________________________

15. How did the professors’ feelings about Blackwell as a student change over time?
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___________________________________________________________________
• **Majority** takes a plural form of the verb if the emphasis is on individual members. (The *majority* of my friends are planning to go to college when they graduate.) If the emphasis is on the group, *majority* takes a singular form. (The *majority* of the human race is still living in poverty.)

An associated word is *minority*, which means “the lesser number or part; less than half.” (Most students take the school bus, but a *minority* walk or ride bicycles to school.)

• The Latin verb *judicare* means “to judge.” By combining the root from *judicare* with the Latin prefix *pre-*, which means “before,” we form the word *prejudice*. To *judge* the merits of a case *before* having all the facts is to show *prejudice*.

• Two Latin words, *unus* (one) and *animus* (mind) combine to form the word *unanimous*. When people are *unanimous* about something, they are of *one mind*, which means that they all agree.