

## **Interview with Ms. Sarah Blackmore, MA History Student & Administrator, on behalf of Elizabeth Blackwell Institute, UK**

### **Q. How has Blackwell affected your own personal outlook on the abilities you have as a woman?**

I did not hear about Elizabeth Blackwell until I was in my late 30's. I was astounded that I had never heard of this woman despite the fact she had been born in the same city as me. During my research into her I became more aware of what she had achieved and the struggles she had on the way. Finding out more about her made me have more self-belief in my abilities & encouraged me to apply for new opportunities, push myself harder & promote myself in a better way.

### **Q. Summarize the effect of Blackwell's achievements from your perspective.**

Blackwell achieved many things during her lifetime the effects of which have been felt for many generations after. Becoming the first female doctor in the US opened the door for other women in the US to follow in her footsteps. Similarly having her name added to the British General Medical Council's medical register in 1859 allowed females in Britain the same opportunities. Among those whom she influenced was the young Elizabeth Garrett (later Garrett Anderson) who, in 1863, and after her own protracted struggle, was to become the second registered medical woman in Britain. Opening an infirmary in New York for women and children highlighted the specific needs of these people and allowed female medical students to gain clinical experience on the wards allowing them to gain valuable experience. In Britain Blackwell set up an organization called the National Health Society in 1871. Society wanted to teach people the benefits of healthy lifestyles which as we now know are the cornerstone of the prevention of illnesses.

### **Q. Were the hardships Blackwell faced in her time like the ones women face today?**

Although some of the hardships Blackwell faced still exist today, such as prejudice & lack of funds, I like to think that the opportunities for women are far greater now than in Blackwell's time. Women no longer have to fight to gain a place in medical college and will not be shunned by their male colleagues.

### **Q. Do you believe Blackwell's effect has extended beyond the field of medicine? If so, what other fields do you believe she's made an impact on?**

Blackwell's involvement in the National Health Society saw her branch out in healthy lifestyles as well as medicine. Fresh air and exercise had long been recognized as beneficial to health. In 1876 the National Health Society began a scheme where volunteers escorted groups of working-class children from places such as Drury Lane and Whitechapel to various parks and open spaces, including St James' Park & Hampstead Heath where the children were allowed to enjoy the fresh air and 'a health-giving romp in the grass.' The Society also persuaded the School Board of London to open school playgrounds on evenings and Saturdays during the summer to provide children with a suitable area to play in. The National Health Society also secured the opening of further sites for children's playgrounds and public gardens to help improve the fitness, pleasure and health of London's urban population. In later life she became interested in social reform, particularly in relation to health and hygiene and the role of women in promoting these that preoccupied her. She was implacably opposed to animal experimentation and to the adoption of Pasteur's treatment of suspected rabies infections. She was interested in spiritualism and Christo-theosophy.

She published extensively on the subject of health and hygiene, a collection of essays being reprinted in her two volumes of *Essays in Medical Sociology* in 1902, and also on sex education and morality. Elizabeth had shocked Victorians by urging young ladies to learn more about their bodies and how to

care for them. In 1876, she wrote about a forbidden subject, sex education, and titled it *Counsel to Parents on the Moral Education of Their Children in Relation to Sex*. She submitted it to twelve different London publishers, all of whom recoiled in horror from the subject matter and refused to print it. One publisher, Hatchard and Co., London, did agree to publish it, but when the widow of Bishop Thomas Hatchard, a late senior editor of the firm, read the proofs she was appalled and prevented the book being printed. It was finally published in 1879, both in London and New York, with reactions ranging from outrage to wary approval. Her autobiography, *Opening the Medical Profession to Women*, was published in 1895. Running through these social reform activities, her writing and her entire professional career were two constant commitments: her profound opposition to materialist medicine, to what she saw as an unprincipled scientific approach which explained ill health in terms of chance encounter with germs or physiological malfunctions alone rather than the result of failure to abide by the moral laws of healthy living; and her views of women's role as guardians of social purity and health.

**Q. What do you personally think Blackwell's biggest accomplishment is?**

Although I think her fight to gain access to medical school is usually seen as her biggest achievement, I believe her campaigning about healthy lifestyles and 'Prevention is better than Cure' under the guise of the National Health Society has left the greatest legacy.

**Q. How did Blackwell overcome and endure those who questioned her views, morals, and motives?**

Blackwell refused to be told that anything was impossible. One of my favorite quotes from her is 'If society will not admit of woman's free development, then society must be remodeled.' She continued to push, challenge & campaign all her life for what she believed in.