

“Beyond the Edinburgh Seven“



This was the title for a symposium given recently in Edinburgh to honour the first group of female medical students matriculated at any university in the United Kingdom. They began studying medicine at Edinburgh in 1869 and although they were ultimately prevented from graduating and qualifying as doctors - because of the immense pressure of their male colleagues and professors - their campaign put the rights of women to a university education on the national political agenda. This summer, 150 years later, they were given posthumous medical degrees and their certificates were handed over to 7 female medical students of the University of Edinburgh.

Agnes McLaren has been a good friend of the Edinburgh Seven and some weeks back I received the invitation to join this symposium with Caroline Debladis, president of the Agnes McLaren Association in Montpellier.

It was a great start with “A fair field and no favour”, an evening lecture on the history of these seven trailblazing women; more followed the next day on the history of the second generation after them. Yes, on one slide we discovered Dr Agnes McLaren, as one of the many pioneering women doctors and we had the pleasure to hear the story of some of them. Then we heard from a researcher in the history of reproductive medicine about how women were perceived in Medicine or how female patients were depicted in medical illustrations. Menstruation was an “unfortunate and unpleasant subject to discuss” - a handicap to women’s claim to equality and proof positive of their natural destiny of motherhood. Catherine Caldercott, Gynaecologist and first female Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, busted myths about gender and changing structures of Scottish Medical Profession. For example, there is evidence that suggests that it takes a longer time for women suffering an acute heart attack to reach a hospital, to have a PCA (Percutaneous coronary angiography) or to get into rehabilitation afterwards, than male patients. She also demonstrated the variation in the percentage of women according to specialty. We discussed the importance of role models and positive leadership to support female and male trainees to thrive in their chosen specialty.

The final talk was given to the new generation of female medical students who presented collected anecdotes demonstrating that female students still have to face intimidating prejudices or are sent to bring coffee while their male colleagues are going to theatre. They also shared with us their joy and abundant energy to make a difference in the life of the medical faculty. One of them was part of the group that received the posthumous degree on behalf of the first female students during summer this year... and lots of small talk in-between and at the end during a reception amidst woven art in the dovecote art studios and with a musical contribution of four medical students.



These two days gave ample proof that the spirit of these women is still alive! But my personal highlight was when Caroline guided me through Scottish weather to the Memorial of Duncan McLaren at the cemetery of St Cuthbert’s Church. Almost hidden is the inscription about his daughter Agnes McLaren, who was a great friend of Sophie Jex-Blake and the other women of the Edinburgh Seven.

Simone Herrmann

