



A Report to The Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation on behalf of the Royal College of Physicians

2018 witnessed the 500th anniversary of the Royal College of Physicians (RCN: 210508). Thanks to the support of The Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation, we were able to mark the occasion with the exhibition **'This Vexed Question': 500 years of women in medicine**. This report briefly outlines the nature of this exhibition and the positive outcomes and legacy it had for the RCP.

Project Summary

Through *'This Vexed Question': 500 years of women in medicine*, the RCP sought to use its 500th anniversary celebrations to showcase women's history over the same period – particularly the contribution women doctors have made to medicine and the role of the RCP in debates over the role of women in medicine. Through the richness of the RCP's collections (especially its archival materials, rare books and fine art), the exhibition sort to provide historic context to contemporary debates around gender and women's roles in medicine.

The exhibition content was spread across eight vitrines and all three walls on the first floor gallery. Themes explored the various elements of the debates which have historically surrounded the role of women in medicine, such as which spheres of medicine were considered more 'acceptable' for women to work in, the stories of early women doctors, and the struggle to gain access to medical training and practice.

Displays were made up of a wide variety of key historical objects, taken both from the RCP's own archives and on loan from 15 other respected institutions, including the Imperial War Museum and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. Such items included:

- **A letter from Elizabeth Garrett to Sir Thomas Watson (5 April 1864)** requesting entrance to the RCP (a request that was refused on grounds of gender).
- ***An operation at the military hospital, Endell Street* (oil on canvas by Francis Dodd, 1920/1)**; this painting, commissioned by the Imperial War Museum, uniquely depicts women surgeons operating on a male patient.
- **A Handkerchief embroidered by suffragette inmates, including Dr Alice Ker, at Holloway Prison (1912)**



In addition to the exhibition itself, *This Vexed Question* was accompanied by a robust and engaging programme of public events, including:

- A private view of the exhibition, witnessing the unveiling of the end of presidency portrait of Professor Dame Jane Dacre and an audience discussion with prominent women doctors talking of their own experiences and the RCP's women curators, who provided historical context.



Professor Dame Jane Dacre unveils the painting commissioned to mark her presidency.

- A series of 'Museum Lates', opening the exhibition until 8pm for one day each month.
- An 'In Conversation' evening during which Dr Lesley Hall and Dr Claire Brock discussed the role of medicine in feminist activism of the early 20th Century.
- And a 'Wikithon' aiming to celebrate the women featured in '*This Vexed Question*' by creating detailed, informative Wikipedia pages for each of them.

Project Outcomes

Outcome 1: Increased Visitor Numbers

The exhibition was well received by press and public alike, with *The Lancet* giving the following account of their experience of the exhibition:

I had come to the College to learn about the women who had made my career possible. I admit I probably arrived with my feminist viewing spectacles on and an expectation to be righteously outraged. But I would say I left feeling fortunate and humbled. My prejudices were met with a balanced collection, as concerned with gender norms in general as it is with women's roles in particular.

Positive reviews like this, combined with increased opening hours and the additional attention the exhibition drew, enabled us to significantly increase visitor numbers. The events mentioned above attracted nearly 300 new visitors to the exhibition, with the late night openings proving especially popular in attracting higher numbers of visitors aged 18-35. In addition to this, the 20+ guided tours offered by our staff over the course of the exhibition welcomed nearly 400 more visitors. Between

this and those members of the public who either visited the exhibition specifically or were exposed to it having initially come the RCP for other reasons, we estimate that a total of almost 40,000 people saw *'This Vexed Question'*.

Outcome 2: Highlight the work of Professor Jane Dacre and the RCP

As well as tackling historical issues, the exhibition served to highlight the current work of the RCP to support women doctors; particularly the critical contributions of then-president Professor Dame Jane Dacre. Objects in the exhibition sought to bring attention to the RCP's recent reports as well as the work of the Women's Medical Federation.

Outcome 3: Highlight and encourage research in the field of women in medicine

In covering such a broad stretch of history, the exhibition allowed us to highlight and emphasise important research carried out in the field of women's history. Through object stories, we were able to highlight the recent research of prominent female historians, including Dr Jennian Geddes, Dr Hilary Ingram, Dr Anne Hanley and Professor Margaret Pelling, all of whom worked hard to bring to the public the stories of women doctors, surgeons, midwives and apothecaries over the past five centuries. Guest curator Briony Hudson also carried out new original research which was highlighted in the exhibition, including work to identify and share the stories of the RCP's first women members. Our research was made available as a reading list available to visitors.

Outcome 4: Provide new ways of thinking about and developing our own collection

'This Vexed Question' provided the RCP with a wonderful opportunity to think more in depth about our own collection and how we could use it to tell more stories about women in medicine. The exhibition prompted new research into the rare books, archives and museum collections we already held, enabling us to identify little-known or forgotten material which could be highlighted. For example, we discovered a silver pap boat made by a female silversmith and a previously uncatalogued petition from the London School of Medicine for Women to the RCP in 1895.



The RCP's Osler Wall (above) was rehung to feature solely portraits of women physicians for the duration of the exhibition.

The exhibition also allowed us to develop our collection to be more reflective of women's stories. We commissioned a small art work to ensure we could share the story of Ivy Woodward, our first female member. Dame Jane Dacre has now donated to the museum her stethoscope, which was used as a part of the display.

Appendix i): Feedback

Feedback from tours

'Excellent exhibition and fascinating curator-led tour'

'Thank you so much for the tour...I learnt a lot this evening'

Visitor feedback

Postcards on feedback wall:

'This is a superb exhibition, I felt the information was extensive but not overwhelming. I love the audio portions.'

'Exhibitions such as this one allow us to acknowledge the determination of strong women in hard times something that comes so natural was taken away and then returned after a lengthy fight – 500 years.'

'We can never make progress in medicine without equal pay, parental leave and job flexibility. FOR ALL.'

'The gender pay gap is a scandal.'

'We need to stop making assumptions that link competence and gender.'

'I was told when I arrived that the painting on the wall was the only black doctor painting in the venue which I was excited to read about and actually read that she was an anonymous nurse. I think more diversity is needed and more research is needed to celebrate ethnic successful doctors.'

Visitor book:

'Thought provoking and varied exhibition.'

'A very well done exhibition.'

'Thank you for this thought-provoking exhibition.'

'I hope this important & interesting exhibition will remain easily available in the college so that it can be viewed by future generations.'

'Interesting exhibition...would be wonderful if the wall of portraits remains as it is after the exhibition's end.'

Critical response

- ***The Lancet*, vol 392 September 22, 2018**

'I had come to the College to learn about the women who had made my career possible. I admit I probably arrived with my feminist viewing spectacles on and an expectation to be righteously outraged. But I would say I left feeling fortunate and humbled. My prejudices were met with a balanced collection, as concerned with gender norms in general as it is with women's roles in particular. The walls were adorned with wonderfully antiquated quotes, such as "Woman as a doctor is a conceit contradictory to nature", from *The Lancet* in 1878 and "It is high time that this unnatural and preposterous attempt...to establish a race of feminine doctors should be exploded", from the *BMJ* in 1862. But these pronouncements lay comfortably beside stories about male midwives, a group that still raises people's suspicions and who remain a minority of their profession. Women at least have cemented their place in the medical world. The story of how that was achieved is told in a comprehensive selection of rare documents, letters, photographs, medical memorabilia, and paintings.'

- **Culturetrip.com**

'To commemorate the institution's 500th anniversary, the Royal College of Physicians has gotten its hands dirty, dissecting its past to illuminate contributions made by women to the medical field that have been previously excluded from the history of medicine. It appears that turning 500 years old is a pretty good impetus for introspection, and the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is not passing up the opportunity. In the RCP Museum's new exhibition, [*This Vexed Question*](#), the institution invites visitors to examine the gendered history of medicine, and how it often excludes contributions made by women.... With the go-ahead from Jane Dacre, the RCP's third female president, Hussey and her team undertook the monumental task of re-examining how the institution has engaged with women since it was first granted a royal charter by King Henry VIII in 1518.'

- **museumcrush.org**

'A fascinating haul of ephemera that invites the visitor to try and identify the UK's first female doctor.'

The exhibition was also featured in the *Telegraph*, *the Daily Express* and on *Women's Hour*. Additionally, the Curator submitted an op-ed which was published in the Guardian Online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/sep/20/women-still-fighting-to-get-their-dues-in-the-medical-profession>