



Did you know that the first female physician opposed abortion, calling it “a gross perversion and destruction of motherhood?” Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910) fought fervently against abortion and for the rights and education of women.

Originally from Bristol, England, Blackwell moved with her family to the United States at age 11. Her family actively supported both the anti-slavery and women’s suffrage movements.

Sparked and appalled by the ill-represented term “female-physician” which applied to abortionists at the time, Blackwell entered the field of medicine in order promote the true welfare of women. In 1845 she recorded the following statement in her diary in response to an article about noted abortionist Madame Restell:

The gross perversion and destruction of motherhood by the abortionist filled me with indignation and awakened active antagonism. That the honorable term “female physician” should be exclusively applied to those women who carried on this shocking trade seemed to me a horror. It was an utter degradation of what might and should become a noble position for women.... I finally determined to do what I could “to redeem the hells,” and especially the one form of hell this forced upon my notice.

Pioneering as a female physician in the 1800’s was no easy task. Blackwell was routinely denied entry to a dozen different medical schools. Finally, she was accepted by Geneva Medical College in New York, not with open arms, but as a joke by the professors and male classmates. Fortunately, such discriminatory attitudes did not impede her success. Blackwell graduated at the top of her class and continued on with two more years of study in Europe where she met Florence Nightingale (pioneer of modern nursing and noted statistician).

In 1857, along with her sister, Emily, America’s second female physician and Marie Zarzewska, a German physician, Dr. Blackwell opened the New York Infirmary for Women – the first American Hospital with an entirely female staff. She subsequently went on to open a women’s medical college at the hospital, providing an opportunity to train even more female physicians.

Blackwell blazed a trail for female physicians of today, promoting the care and well-being of women and children and actively fighting against abortion. In 1869, she returned to her home country, England, where she went into private practice, organized the National Health Society, and became a professor of gynecology at the London School of Medicine for Women.

Her opposition to abortion and advocacy for the rights of women serves as one more illustration that being pro-life and pro-woman consistently go hand in hand.

Sources of more information about Dr. Blackwell:

Prolife Feminism Yesterday and Today, Mary Krane Derr, Rachel Macnair, Linda Naranjo-Huebl, eds. (New York: Sulzburger & Graham Publishing, Ltd.) 1995.

Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women: Autobiographical Sketches, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co.) 1895.