

A Monstrous Regiment of Women?

Attitudes To The Vanguard of Female Dentists

by
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Although Lilian Lindsay was the first British woman to be awarded a Diploma by the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh, in 1895, she was not the first Scots woman to qualify. This honour belongs to Williemia Simmers who in 1901 received the LDS of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. The first and only Scotswoman to appear on the Dentists Register of 1879 was Elizabeth Laird of High Street, Monifieth, Fife who was registered as having been in *bone fide* dental practice in conjunction with pharmacy before the introduction of the [1878] Act.

An editorial which appeared in the *British Journal of Dental Science* in 1885, made quite clear the viewpoint of that organ on the subject of women in dentistry:

“To us it would appear likely that in England (sic) lady dentists will prove a development only of the far distant future, if at all. On the other hand, the employment of ladies in less ambitious, certainly not less useful capacity, of office (surgery) assistants might very well become more general and more openly recognised . . .”
An editorial in the *Journal of the British Dental Association* in 1887, on the proposed admission of ladies as students to the *National Dental Hospital* in London produced some comment:

“Dentistry may seem to offer some of the opportunities which attracted them [to medicine and surgery] without the disadvantages which made them

hesitate. Yet there are conditions appertaining to dental surgery which makes it at least doubtful if the calling is one in which women are likely generally to succeed. . . .”

The writer continues with the assurance that it should not be thought ‘for a moment’ that women’s ability to acquire the necessary knowledge and skill was being questioned:

“The hindrance to perfect success will lie purely and simply in the very trying physical conditions of dental work. To stand over a chair for many hours continually exercising slight muscular effort and subject in a proportion of cases, at least, to some unpleasant influences, is a much more serious strain than at first sight appears, under it a proportion of men soon fail. . . .”

The editorial concludes:

“... it ought also in fairness to be admitted that women have some qualities fitting them at least for that exercise of the conservative treatment of dental disease which marks the present time. Delicacy of touch and patience and sympathy with children are among

these.” When the Scottish branch of the British Dental Association elected a lady in 1895, it set off a correspondence in the *Journal* of that body. A correspondent signing himself, ‘*Fissure Bur*’, chal-

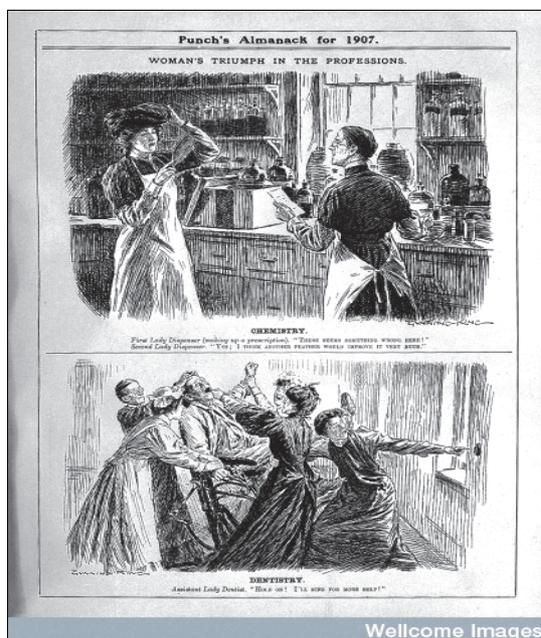


Fig. 1
Jokes About Women Pharmacists and Dentists
Punch, 1907.

Chemistry (above) First Lady Dispenser making up a prescription: ‘There seems to be something wrong here.’ Second Lady Dispenser: ‘Yes; I think another feather would improve it very much.’

Dentistry (below) Assistant Lady Dentist: ‘Hold on! I’ll ring for more help!’

lenged the interpretation of one of the bye-laws on the grounds that the phrase concerned allowed only the admission of males as it used the pronoun 'he.' The legend was worded as follows: 'A person who is registered in the Dentists Register shall be eligible for election providing that he be of good character.' 'Fissure Bur'

arguing on the grounds of linguistics thought that the Scottish branch was mistaken. He concluded, '... the precipitancy of the Scottish branch has landed the British Dental Association in a kind of dilemma and placed their protégée in an invidious and illogical position ...' He ended by saying that if lady members were desirable the position could be arrived at, 'but not by a rush.'

In the following issue of the Journal, 'Fissure Bur's' letter elicited a response, and it became clear that the lady in Question was Miss Lilian Murray, LDS Edinburgh, the first woman in Great Britain to obtain a qualification. The writer pointed out that the lady's membership had been considered over a period of two months and that she was admitted to membership by the perfectly orderly action of the Scottish branch on 20th August [1895].

There had been no 'rushing' everything had been done in order. As a parting shot, the writer noted that *Mr Fissure Bur's* name did not appear on the Dentists Register and consequently he was not a member of the BDA. He must have obtained his information second-hand and like most second-hand information it turned out to be incorrect.

Whether Rees Price the writer of the letter was being facetious is not known. In November of 1895, past and present students of the National Dental Hospital held their annual dinner. In responding to the toast to the visitors, Mr Christopher Heath FRCS, President of the Royal College of Surgeons England, had this to say:

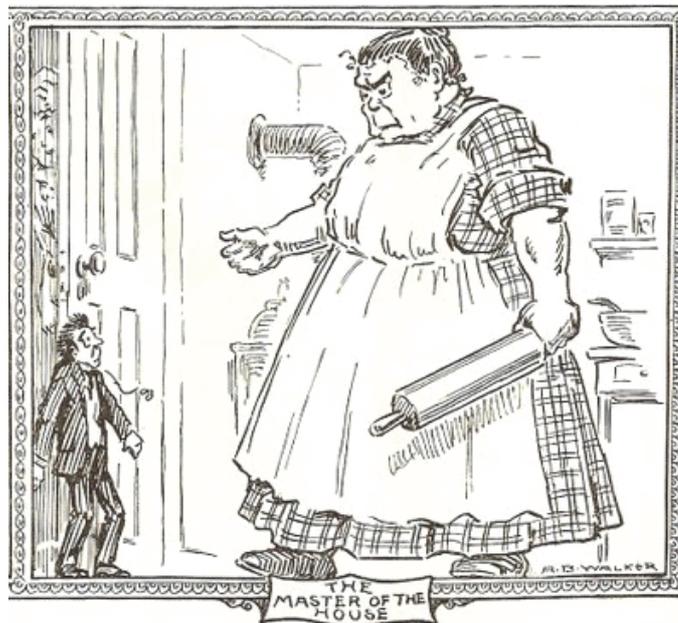
"I presume that some of you may have taken the trouble to read up the contemporary history of the College and will know that we have had a discussion as to whether ladies should be admitted to the College. The Scotch board has already, as I understand admitted one lady to their licence. Now I need hardly to say that where one woman has got her foot others will certainly follow, and therefore I warn you gentlemen in time, that either you must be prepared to fight the ladies or perhaps you had better join company with them. ..."

In reply to the toast to the Chair, Sir Dyce Duckworth MD, was less equivocal:

"The President of the College of Surgeons spoke as to the desirability of women entering your branch of the profession. Now as I have been in the Navy I am accustomed to fly my flag and I make

bold here to say whether you like it or not, that I am one of those who think woman is not a fit human being to be taught or learn, or to practise surgery or dentistry. I have thought over this question for many years and I believe in the unfitness of women, created as she is for the possibilities of a profession like ours, and I have been told that women students of dentistry who have been undergoing studies for a medical or surgical diploma, present a most sorry sight when they

' a large-boned muscular woman with massive jaw bones, who wears pincenez, ...and hair closely cropped... her husband is a little puny individual... '



**Fig. 2. Freize For A Bachelor's Apartment
(A. B. Walker)**

'Life Magazine', 11 April 1912.



Lilian Lindsay (1871-1960)
Dentist, Dental Historian, Librarian and Author
First Qualified Woman Dentist In Britain
First Woman President of the BDA

practise dentistry. I maintain that the average woman is not endowed with a sufficient amount of muscle to extract some teeth. We are told that they will only practise among women and children, but I hold that women and children ought to be dealt with by people capable in every respect. ...”

There is no record of the reaction to this speech by Sir Dyce Duckworth; obviously his point of view did not prevail, as by 1895 the National Dental Hospital was admitting women to the same course as men.

Generally Women of leisure...

The controversy over the question of women in dentistry seemed to be a feature of the 1890s. In its issue of April 1896, the *Dental Record* reports on a debate on the subject entitled, *Should Women be Dentists?* F Miller MB, apparently a male, launched an attack on what he called ‘the new woman’ an epithet which he reserved for...

“ those females (generally women of leisure) whom one meets occasionally and who have several diagnostic or pathognomonic features. One easily recognises the tall, large-boned muscular woman with prominent and massive jaw bones, who wear pince-nez, tailor-made dresses (often badly fitting) and hair closely cropped; we hear she lectures on ‘Womens Rights’ (and are not in the least surprised), and if she has so far descended from her own pedestal as to marry, her husband is more often than not a little puny individual, whose

only attempt at originality is to wear different trousers occasionally, and we feel involuntarily that there has been some mistake and that those articles of attire ought to have been allotted to his better half. ...”

Miller thought that one did not meet with the ordinary feeling of ‘jolly-good-fellowship’ so often as among women as one did among men. On the other hand, it was more common to meet with examples of ‘Hero-worship’ in women than in men. He conceded that women had to live as well as men and if they had to earn their own daily bread, why should they not, if they are able to satisfy the board of examiners enter the learned professions? He was also of the opinion that most women preferred men dentists to women just as they would rather have a male doctor to treat them. He was once told by a lady patient ‘Ladies will never succeed as doctors among ladies as they can’t sympathise with us as men can.’

Turning to the question of whether women were physically and mentally able to become dentists, and whether they could make it profitable, Miller was advised to write to Miss Lilian Murray. He received a considered and objective reply which stressed that as there were some men who could never become dentists so it was the case with women. She was not able to generalise on the subject, for the reason that she had only known one woman beside herself who had been in practice. Women could not claim to have the same physical strength as men but, because of their tact and tenderness were probably more fitted to attend to the teeth of children. As far as extractions were concerned, a woman with skill would succeed as well as a man. In conservation of teeth there was no differentiation between the sexes. What might militate against women, she added was that their natural tenderness would cause them to shrink from treatment which in order to be performed properly would cause pain to the patient – local anaesthetics were not usually given routinely at this time for fillings as they were later.

Neatness and Patience

Miller thought that Miss Murray had under-rated the points in favour of women and over-rated those that might be used against women as dentists. Neatness and patience, especially the latter were indispensable qualities for a dentist and here he thought that the old adage, ‘Patience is a virtue sel-

dom found in women and never in man' gave women an advantage. Nevertheless, he still thought that women preferred to go to a male dentist, and he could not imagine that an athletic powerful man who had been suffering from toothache would think about going to a lady dentist to have his tooth pulled.

A warning on female labour

The July issue of *The British Dental Journal* carried a warning on the question of female labour in dentistry. A pamphlet which it had obtained advertised *The School of Women Artificial Teeth Mechanics* operating at Chancery Lane, London. According to the editorial, the school offered to train a girl to the standards of a junior mechanic in three months for a fee of five guineas. This claim was rebutted as it normally took from 2 – 5 years to reach the standard to attain junior mechanic standard. In addition the demand for juniors was not very large and beside which the market was already overcrowded. Any girl even though they had obtained a perfect knowledge of dental mechanics, would have the greatest difficulty in earning a living. The 'Journal' advised any young lady who is infatuated with the desire of learning mechanical dentistry to go to a qualified dentist or better still she should not learn mechanical dentistry at all, "... and above all not at 65 and 66 Chancery Lane."

The first years of the twentieth century saw the gradual acceptance of women in dentistry in Scotland, if not elsewhere in the United Kingdom and in 1906 at the Annual General Meeting of the Odonto-Chirurgical Society held in Edinburgh, it was agreed to amend the constitution to allow women legally qualified to practise dentistry, to be admitted as members.

The War years saw the deployment of women in trades and occupations previously held to be the monopoly of men, so it was no surprise when the Army in 1920, recruited three women from the London School of Dental Mechanics to take up service in Germany with the Rhine Army. Selected by the War Office, they would serve under the Red Cross on a six months' contract at Cologne with a rank equivalent to Sergeant. In reporting the news, *The Glasgow Herald* pointed out that their wage of 47s 6d per week, less 14s mess allowance, was in contrast to the £5-£6 a week being paid by civilian dentists.

The British Dental Association protested 'vigorously' on the grounds that a number of men,

disabled or discharged from the services, were available for these posts. The Council of the Association was subsequently informed by the War Office that no further women would be employed. Notwithstanding male prejudices, by the year 1912, 13 women had obtained their LDS qualification in Scotland; 6 in Glasgow and 7 in Edinburgh. The Register for 1921 contained the names of 17 women and in 1923 the first Register which took into account the newly-registered under the Dentists Act of 1921, the names of 21 women appeared.

Turning to Census returns for Scotland between 1861 and 1921, these show that a number of women declared dentistry to be their main occupation, but many were not on the Register, apparently unqualified.

The list is as follows:

1861 ... 3	1891 ... 8	1921 ... 52
1871 ... 1	1901 ... 35	
1881 ... 1	1911 ... 72	

Source: Census Returns Scotland, (Occupation Tables) 1861-1921.

The history of Scottish women in dentistry can only be sketched here. It is one of many areas which require further historical research.



First World War Female Dentist Treating A Patient