



When women came to Queen's

Julia Cataudella

Among its many distinctions, the medical school at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., was the first in Canada to admit women to its undergraduate courses. It was also the first to exclude them and, finally, one of the last to readmit them.

The story begins in 1880, when Queen's admitted 3 undergraduate female medical students. Two years later, anatomist Kenneth Fenwick led a group of male students who threatened to transfer to Toronto, where lectures would not be "watered down" by the presence of women.¹ When the women launched complaints against this professor, they were charged with restricting academic freedom. A meeting that summer impelled the medical school's principal and dean to open a Women's Medical College in Kingston to take the pressure off Queen's, but by 1891 its enrollment had faltered; more Canadian women were attending a women's medical college in Toronto and another at Bishop's University in Quebec. By 1893 the women's college in Kingston had succumbed to financial difficulties, and the students were transferred to the other women's schools.² Paradoxically, when it came to readmitting women in the 20th century, Queen's was one of the last medical faculties to do away with men-only medicine.

The steps leading to their readmission in 1943 were taken during a time of social upheaval in Canada, during which universities were beginning to consider a new, postwar picture of Canadian society. At the same time, the medical school was being pressured by the armed forces to produce more medical officers. In response to the emergency, a fast-track curriculum was developed to graduate a class every 8 months. Training time was reduced by 18 months, and this placed both teachers and students into a steady, unpleasant grind.

In December 1942, in response to an urgent questionnaire from the Canadian Medical Procurement and Assignment Board, the total absence of women in medicine at Queen's was brought to the attention of the faculty during a special meeting. The questionnaire asked: "How many women do you accept?" The Queen's faculty members responded: "None."³ The question itself implied that schools that did admit women generally applied a limit or unwritten quota. Isolated from external societal change, Queen's was lagging behind the times.

On May 7, 1943, Dr. Harold Ettinger moved that the statement "Men only admitted" be deleted from page 31 of the medical school calendar.⁴ Brief reference was made to the history of female medical students at Queen's, and Dr. Edwyn Robertson noted that "the provision of medical care in forthcoming years was likely to be inadequate, and that



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The Class of '48: Queen's once again produces female graduates

the need for women graduates would certainly exist." The motion was tabled until a small committee appointed by the dean could consider the issue. The committee included Dr. W. Ford Connell, the new head of the Department of Medicine, and Ettinger, a future dean.

A month later, the committee reported back with a list of 18 "considerations."⁵ The first was a reminder that Queen's had been the first Canadian university to admit women into medicine, and that their eventual exclusion had resulted from "disturbances between women and men students." The committee pointed out that violent antagonism toward women students had disappeared — a vote taken in the fourth-year class showed that half the students approved of the admission of women as students, and none was markedly opposed.

Pent-up demand for admission was obvious. The Queen's dean of women, Vibert Douglas, reported that many of the university's female students felt discriminated against because they were prohibited from applying to medical school.⁶ Medicine was the only faculty from which women were excluded.

Another compelling factor was a donation by one of the university's early women graduates, Agnes Craine, who had graduated from the Women's Medical College in 1888. She gave Queen's \$350 000 in 1936, when the university was seeking money for a much-needed building for biochemistry. As the only building erected on campus during the Depression, the remarkable Craine Building impressed the small committee, which noted that Agnes Craine's generosity had never been matched by any of Queen's much more numerous male medical graduates.

The committee pointed out that 90% of North Ameri-



Dr. Ford Connell teaching young medical students, circa 1940s

can medical schools now admitted both women and men and that there was little standing in the way of their entry save tradition. Indeed, tradition had made medicine a male profession, and strong tradition resists change. In fact, until 1988 women were excluded from Medical House, a hybrid fraternity and communal home that has existed for Queen's medical students since 1933.

I asked Connell, an original member of the committee, why the medical school had turned its back on women for so long. "Well, I don't know, dear, exactly why we didn't admit them sooner," he replied. "It was the same reason they didn't admit them at the Royal Military College."

He then reflected: "Women had become important by that time [1943]. We needed the women in the medical profession, and we got them."⁷

In presenting its case for admission, the committee argued that:

- More female medical students attended the University of Toronto than any other medical school in North America.
- In Britain, medical schools in Scotland and England were educating women doctors.
- Ninety-five percent of female graduates of the University of Toronto and University of Western Ontario were still practising 10 years later — a proportion that was at least as high as for male graduates.
- Female physicians were at least as capable and efficient as males.
- Women physicians were already serving in the army, navy and air force.
- In the postwar world many services would be socialized, and a need for more physicians was anticipated; women were likely to play a more important role in medicine.

The committee members brought the faculty up to speed on what was happening in the outside world and their message was clear: full-fledged tradition had to go if the university was to progress. In his report for 1943, Dean Melvin explained that the faculty could not simply return to prewar practices once wartime demands had lessened. Rather, it must "face and resolve major problems of future policy."

The final part of the committee's report served to maintain the tradition it sought to revoke. In all probability, the

committee reported, "few women students would be accepted and the men students thereby rejected would probably be of a low grade." Queen's was not alone in this type of thinking, as evidenced by the unwritten quotas that existed at the time.

The motion to strike "Men only admitted" from the medical school calendar was put to the meeting following the committee's presentation, and after a brief "mainly favourable" discussion, it carried.

Alice Bertram and Margaret Elliot were the first women students to grace the medical school halls at Queen's in 1943. Elliot received the Boak Scholarship in recognition of the highest marks in written and oral exams in third-year anatomy. The following year she accepted the scholarship for highest standing in her class.

Her classmate, Alice Bertram, was a first cousin of Ford Connell. He said her father — "a very rich man from Dundas, near Hamilton" — had "this very clever girl . . . very interested in studying medicine. She was a very great person."⁷ Connell was sorry that she died young.

Dr. Ruth Galbraith of the class of '57 offered a glimpse of the challenges facing female medical students at Queen's in the years following their readmission. Her class began with 6 women, and she acknowledges that an unwritten quota existed. The classes in the years surrounding hers generally contained no more than 6 women, and some contained none.

When I asked her about Medical House and its men-only policy, she urged me to "look at the big picture — that house was all they had. They didn't have the advantages women had."⁸ She was referring to the 2 residences available to women and to a special society for female students.

Her sentiments were inspiring. Galbraith recalls being an integral part of a class that had "tremendous spirit and camaraderie." She helped create a new tradition at Queen's, of which I am one of the beneficiaries.

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