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Sketches from the history of psychiatry

"An Innovation, a Revolution"

The admission of women members to the Medico-Psychological Association

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In 1886, the Medico-Psychological Association established its own examinations leading to a certificate of psychological medicine. Although discussions concerning the setting up of this certificate clearly indicated that it was regarded as a qualification for men, by 1888 women medical practitioners were sitting the examination and appear, without comment, in the lists of successful candidates. However, the question of the admission of lady members to the Association proved to be a much more controversial matter.

It was Dr Conolly Norman of Richmond Asylum, Dublin who raised the question when he decided to put forward the name of his protégée Dr Eleonora Fleury and, probably, he was fully aware of the likely reception of his proposal. Dr Norman had been a MPA member since 1880 (Irish Secretary since 1887) and was a regular attender of Association meetings. In 1895 he was to become President as well as Editor of the *Journal of Mental Science* and he appears to have been highly regarded by his colleagues (J.M.S., 1908). The question of the status of female medical practitioners may well already have been discussed informally as in fact the previous year the BMA had expunged the clause "No female shall be eligible for election as a member of the Association" from its constitution (Little, 1932).

Dr Fleury's name appeared on the list of candidates for prospective membership of the MPA put before its Council of July 1893. After discussion Council agreed to ask the President to "raise the question whether female practitioners should become members of the Association" at the next annual meeting. The President was Dr J. M. Lindsay of Derby County Asylum. It is clear from his presidential address that he had already considered the admission of women for he stated "I cannot see how in common fairness or on what valid ground legally qualified women can be excluded from membership if they wish to join the Association on the same terms and subject to the same rules as men" (Lindsay, 1893). The matter, however, had to be discussed by the meeting and the following excerpts from the minutes are of interest.

Dr Conolly Norman, Dr Fleury's mentor
(We regret that Dr Fleury's portrait is not available)

"**The President** in introducing the subject, said – I have been instructed by the Council to draw your attention to a name on this list. It is number seven; she is a woman, and is MB BCh Royal University of Ireland, and Clinical Assistant at the Richmond District Asylum, Dublin. The Council thought that your attention should be drawn to this, because it opens out the very important question of female membership, a question which the Council think should be fairly placed before the Association, and that you should come to some decision to-day, if possible, before balloting for the whole of the members. If you wish to ballot for the whole of the members after I have explained and drawn your attention to this name, then, of course, the matter is in the

hands of the Association. It is an innovation, a revolution.

Dr Rayner (Harley Street) rose to support the election of lady members.

Dr Ireland (retired; formerly Larbert Institution, Stirling) – It is of considerable importance and it is very singular that this name was put down here without the knowledge or the consent of the Council, and without any intimation that this was a woman at all (laughter). I belong to the old school, and was astonished at this proposal. I was in doubt, and I inquired whether it was a female or a male name. This is promoted by someone, there is no doubt, and perhaps by the same party who changed the word "men" into "practitioners". Those who did so should come here and tell us how it was done in this manner.

Dr J. A. Campbell (Cumberland and Westmorland Asylum) – Is the list in accordance with the rules?

The President – A lady is ineligible, according to the present rules . . .

Dr Conolly Norman . . . was a member of the Rules Committee, and at that Committee had raised this question, and had been then reminded of recent legislation by which it was decided that the words "man" and "men", "he" and "his", when used in a general sense had been held to include members of both sexes. He submitted that this applied to the present case, and that therefore under their present rules women were eligible. He nominated the lady whose name came before them that day on the list, and he begged to assure the Association that he had no intention whatever of doing anything in a hole-and-corner way. He was of the decided opinion that women should be admitted to their Association. They could not exclude them from their profession; that was out of their power. Why, then, try to exclude then from that Association? He failed to see any object in excluding them. It would be said that they feared women meeting them on equal grounds. Why should they? The female graduates whom the speaker had met were decidedly superior to the average of male graduates, but just because he was not one of those who thought our sex have anything to fear from the competition of women he was of opinion that women ought to have everything open to them. If it is said that women are unfit to compete with men in our profession, that is a more general question, but that has been already decided for us. We had already women in our asylums as medical officers, and the lady whose name appeared on the paper was a paid official in a public lunatic asylum. There was also at the present time a female medical officer in the Holloway Asylum. There was only one argument upon the subject worth considering. Supposing females were members of the Association, and appeared at their meetings, they might hamper their discussions upon subjects of a certain class. Dr Norman pointed out that many members of the Association were now teachers. Most of these, like himself, had had to teach women and no doubt all would have to do so before long. Would they refuse pupils on account of their sex? He could say from personal knowledge that at the meetings of the various sections (anatomical, surgical, pathological, medical and obstetrical) of the Academy of Medicine in Ireland female graduates and students were constantly present, and no difficulty arose. Every subject brought forward was discussed with the same scientific freedom as before. What objections there might have been had long since passed away. Therefore, if in order, he would move "that women shall be eligible for election into their Association". He maintained, in conclusion, that the word "man", as used in the rules, in law included "women".

Dr Yellowlees (Royal Asylum, Glasgow) seconded.

Dr Holmes (Overdale Asylum, Lancashire) moved that this name be taken separately from the others. He held a peculiar position. He has had the privilege of studying anatomy and dissecting in the same room as female students, and looking back dispassionately he could not but feel well towards those ladies. They must march with the advance of the ideas of the present generation. Ladies were about to become members of the British Medical Association. He thought lady practitioners would be an acquisition to their body. . . ."

There followed an animated debate on whether the word 'men' mentioned in the rules included 'women' as well for Clause III of Chapter I of the rules stated that ordinary members of the Association 'shall be legally qualified medical *men* interested in the treatment of insanity'. The debate culminated in two proposals (i) "that according to the rules of the Association women are not eligible" and (ii) "that the term 'men', as in Clause III, chapter I, does include women". The first motion was carried by 26 votes to 16 and the debate concluded as follows:—

Dr Hack Tuke (The Retreat, York) – I hope it will be clearly understood that this result is not what we wish, but merely what we consider to be the interpretation of the present rule (hear, hear).

Dr Urquhart (Royal Asylum, Perth) – It is a victory for good grammar.

The President – We will now proceed to the ballot for the election of "men" (laughter)."

The question was next taken up at the Adjourned Annual Meeting of 1893 under the heading "Constitution".

Dr Ireland said that as the rule stood it would include women. He thought that the admission of women was a question that ought not be hurried through without a discussion, and he proposed, therefore, as an amendment, that the old rule, "That the Association should consist of (1) legally qualified medical men", etc, should be allowed to stand.

Dr Yellowlees said that at the present day it would not do to keep women out of the Association. The law had given them the right to practise, the British Medical Association had admitted them, and it would be unwise conservatism to exclude them. There was even a stronger reason why they should be admitted. Science knew nothing about sex, and the question of delicacy could not be brought forward. Women naturally knew more about women than men, and their assistance would be of very great value. . . .

Dr Savage (retired; formerly Bethlem Hospital, London) said that there were many Societies which admitted lady members. Of course there was a great difference between admitting them to the Association and allowing them to take part in the business of the Association. He quite thought the time had come when women should be recognised as assistants.

Dr Ireland said that there was a great difference between recognising the right of women to be admitted to the profession and admitting them as members of a particular Association. There were many matters which came before the Association which would be very disagreeable to have to discuss before women."

Eventually, "Dr Ireland's amendment was then put, seven voting for it and 23 against. The new rule providing for the admission of ladies was then agreed to".

Of Dr Fleury, who was elected in 1894, there is little to mention. Dr Ireland's fears were unfounded, as no record appears of her having imposed her presence at any Association general meeting. She was "unavoidably absent" from the May 1895 Irish Divisional Meeting when her paper "Agitated Melancholia in Women" was read by the President. Dr Fleury remained a member until 1924. Undoubtedly her election paved the way for other women and by 1900, 14 women were, or had been, members including Dr A. H. A. Boyle, who became the first woman president in 1939.

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Wisdom

A short series of short pieces (with questions)

2. Choice

It is in the nature of eagles to fly. It is in the nature of human conditioning to develop attachments and aversions. The story is told of the court monkey who finds a luscious fruit inside a narrow-necked bowl. When the fruit is grasped however the monkey's full fist does not allow him to withdraw his hand, yet to the amusement of onlookers he will not relinquish the object of his desire. How foolish!

The story is amusing but might make the discerning uncomfortable. Are we not often similarly trapped by our attachments, at the mercy of our aversions, and defeated by our ignorance? How often, in difficult situations, do we human beings now know of or recognise the contribution we make ourselves to our unhappiness? How often do we forget that there is choice?

"There are three poisons", said the tenth century teacher Atisha, "Attachment, leading to desire; aversion, leading to hatred; and ignorance, leading to indifference."

The wise choice is the way of freedom. . . Freedom from what? Freedom from attachment, desire, passion. Freedom from dislikes, antipathies. Freedom from indifference. This is the way of detachment. The wise student says, "I want to be free more than I want what I want." How can this be achieved?

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