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“Shut Down and Shut Out: Women Physicians in the Era of Medical Education Reform”

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Abstract

The percentage of women as a share of all physicians rose rapidly after 1870. In some cities, women had made significant inroads into the medical profession by 1900. For example, in 1900 women accounted for 18 percent of practicing physicians in Boston, 13 percent in Chicago, 15 percent in Los Angeles, 14 percent in San Francisco, and 19 percent in Minneapolis. By 1910, women comprised six percent of practicing physicians nationwide, but their numbers then started to decline. Women would not again comprise over six percent of physicians until after 1960, following the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, a class action lawsuit filed in 1970 alleging discrimination against women applicants by U.S. medical schools, and the passage of Title IX in 1972. Today, women make up 35 percent of practicing physicians and half of medical school applicants.

In this paper, we argue that the decline in women’s progress into medicine after 1910 and its stagnation during the first part of the twentieth century has its roots in medical education reforms that occurred during the century’s first decades. These reforms resulted in a high number of school closures, and also required applicants to have completed pre-medical college coursework. Using a newly constructed dataset of all American medical schools, we investigate the relationship between women’s enrollment and the changes in medical education of the period. Results confirm that medical school closures disproportionately harmed women. Importantly, we demonstrate that that decreases in female enrollment in the schools that remained open were systematically related to changes in those schools’ requirements that frequently preceded licensing laws. In particular, we find that female enrollment dropped when schools adopted requirements for two years of college coursework, and when schools required the completion of a hospital internship.