

How women pharmacists struggled for recognition before 1905

As a background to the formation of the National Association of Women Pharmacists in 1905, Marilyn Creese describes how women pharmacists won the right to become members of the Pharmaceutical Society

In 200 years time when the Society would no longer be ashamed of a few women being admitted there might be some eminent woman pharmacist who had entered into original research, who would be an honour to this society and it was desirable that if there were any talent in the women who had the temerity to enter the ranks, then they should be welcome — Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions 1878;8:921.

These words were spoken by the women's protagonist, Robert Hampson, at the Pharmaceutical Society's annual general meeting in May 1878. Hampson was taking part in a discussion on whether or not women should be admitted to the Society. Little was he to realise just how quickly the women he supported would justify his faith. Today, few would challenge the contribution and role of women pharmacists in either the Society or pharmacy, but the path to this was not easy. Along the way, women found it necessary to establish their own organisation, the National Association of Women Pharmacists (originally known as the Association of Women Pharmacists) to represent their views and fight for status.

Recognition of women by the back door

In the 19th century, just as today, the work of pharmacists and chemists and druggists ranged from wholesale manufacturers and exporters to physicians' dispensers and shopkeepers. Panel 1 shows the number of women in the pharmaceutical trade, according to a census in 1861. There is no indication that when the Society was founded women's membership was ever even considered and it was not until the passing of the 1868 Pharmacy Act that women's role in the profession drew any attention, or had any relevance to the Society. At that time, the Society had a men-only membership and it was the 1868 Act and the rules of the Society's examination system that left two loopholes which eventually opened the doors to women.

The Act gave the Society control over those allowed to sell or dispense prescriptions and potions containing poisons, and to exclude "unlicensed practitioners". By registering those practising under the terms of the Act, the Society gave them formal recognition. The normal route for registration was through an examination system: the Preliminary Examination allowed a student



Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society

Ada Richardson qualified as a chemist and druggist in 1906, a year after the National Association of Women Pharmacists was formed

to register as an apprentice; the Minor Examination allowed a fully-trained apprentice to qualify as an assistant or dispenser, to open a shop and become an associate member; and the Major Examination led to the prestigious title of pharmaceutical chemist and eligibility for full membership and posts within the Society. Passing the examinations would lead to the appropriate registration and right to practise but membership of the Society was not obligatory and an application had to be made.

Before 1868, many competent practitioners did not have these formal qualifications so for a transitional period the 1868 Act permitted anyone in Great Britain who was already running a business or shop for "compounding the prescriptions of duly qualified medical practitioners" to be automatically registered. Therefore, women who were already running businesses (usually inherited from fathers or husbands) had to be registered in order to continue the family business. When the list of those permitted to register under the Act was produced, 215 of 11,638 named were women. Therefore, through this "back door" route, a small number of women were de facto accepted into, and recognised by the profession.

Assistants were not business owners so were not entitled to automatic registration. Instead, provided they had been working as an assistant for at least three years, they were offered the opportunity to take a Modified Examination in order to be placed on the register. This transitional examination would have the same status, for registration purposes,

as the Minor Examination but, unlike the Minor, it would not confer membership eligibility.

Women taking examinations

When the 1868 Act was compiled, the examination arrangements simply referred to "persons" so women were not specifically excluded. It had not, apparently, occurred to anyone that women would wish to pursue pharmaceutical careers. It was also thought that women would not want to take over businesses if it meant having to gain qualifications.

The Society soon found this assumption tested when Frances (Fanny) Elizabeth Potter arrived to take the Modified Examination on 5 February 1869, having applied simply as F. E. Potter. It now faced a dilemma — whether or not to allow her to sit the examination. The Society's lawyers advised that under the terms of the Act examiners were

Panel 1: Number of women in the pharmaceutical trade in 1861*

- 388 women were engaged in the business of chemists and druggists
- 243 women were "manufacturing chemists"
- 20 women were "medicine vendors, herb doctors etc"
- 30 women were "connected with medicine"

*Taken from *The English Women's Review* 1868;(1):348–53.

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“empowered and required to examine all such persons as shall tender themselves for the examination under the passing of this Act” so they had little choice but to allow Fanny to sit the examination. She was followed, later in 1869, by Catherine Hodgson Fisher and Alice Vickery, who became the first woman to qualify by passing the Minor Examination, which entitled her to apply for associate membership.

Faced with the prospect of having to officially accept women into the profession, the members of the Society fought a rearguard action both to make it more difficult for women to study (and therefore qualify) and to keep them out of the Society (away from any real influence).

Women had never been accepted for lectures at the School of Pharmacy, founded in 1842 at Bloomsbury Square but, largely as an oversight, Elizabeth Garrett (later Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson) had attended lectures there in 1862, as part of her studies for the Society of Apothecaries examinations. The rules had been quickly tightened up to prevent this happening again and this was still the case when, in 1872, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson made a request that other women should be allowed to attend lectures there. The request was, predictably, refused but the cause was taken up by Robert Hampson, one of the more radical new members of the Society's council. As a result, in October 1872 women were granted the concession of attending lectures but not practicals. They were not seen or treated as equals and were accepted only on sufferance, being expected to use a separate entrance and to sit on their own in a row at the front.

In 1874, John Attfield, Professor of practical chemistry, requested that women should be allowed to attend practical classes but this was refused, on the grounds that they were “too delicate to be required to stand at a chemical bench for two hours.” However, in the same year, a request by the Professor of materia medica, Edward Morell Holmes, that ladies should be allowed to sit while looking at specimens was turned down on the grounds that they should be treated the same as men.

Robert Hampson (see Panel 2) played a significant role in the women's struggle for professional acceptance. He continued the drive for equal recognition in the examination system by proposing that women should be allowed to compete for prizes and scholarships awarded by the School of Pharmacy. He also threw his energies into supporting the claims of women to be allowed to join the Society, refusing to allow the issue to be brushed under the carpet.

In 1868, a business woman, Elizabeth Leach, had been refused membership of the Society. Hampson re-opened the membership issue for her and also supported several other applicants for registration. These were Rose Coombes Minshull and Louisa Stammwitz, who had both taken the Preliminary Examination, and Alice Marion Hart who had passed the Certificate of the

Apothecaries Society in lieu of the Preliminary. Of the 166 candidates who took the examination, Rose Coombes Minshull scored the highest but she, and the others were not initially granted registration as students. They had to wait until 1873, when they were registered with the consent of the AGM.

These women were not simply taking the Modified Examination to continue in posts they already had but were embarking on the official examination route. The opposition to their registration was based on the fear that women might want to go on to pass the Minor and Major Examinations, which would allow them to claim membership of the Society. This later became the case when, in 1876, Isabella Skinner Clarke (later Isabella Skinner Clarke Keer) became the first woman to pass the Major Examination.

In fact, all these women were eventually registered (so were able to practice), but their subsequent applications for membership of the Society were also initially rejected.

The big debate

By the 1870s, the role of women in society had become a popular topic of debate. It was not only the women pharmacists and druggists who were fighting for recognition. Women were becoming generally more vocal and willing to fight their cause, and increasingly adept at supporting each other. In 1868, *The English Women's Review*, in anticipation of the 1868 Act, had argued that pharmacy would be a suitable profession for women (see Panel 3). It pointed out that many women already ran pharmaceutical businesses and that there was no reason why girls should not be allowed the same apprentice opportunities as boys.

There was also interest in finding suitable posts for reasonably educated, middle class women, which would extend their talents beyond limiting roles as dressmakers and governesses, traditionally seen as the only suitable opportunities for “respectable women of limited means”. In July 1859, The Society for Employment for Women was founded by Jessie Boucherett for just this purpose. Its

activities included sponsoring some of the women who were being trained at the St Mary's Dispensary for Women and Children, started by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in 1866. This, plus the fact that Isabella Skinner Clarke had been trained in Robert Hampson's shop suggests a degree of active support for women's attempts to gain recognition in the field of pharmacy.

First women members of the Society

In spite of the general debate the argument about allowing women to join the Society lasted for seven years. Robert Hampson spearheaded the debate for the inclusion of women and the opposition was led by George Webb Sandford (president of the Society 1863–9, 1870–1 and 1879–80). Sandford's arguments against women were to the effect that if the state differentiated on sex then so could the Society, which had been “founded by men for men”. He also “believed in the principle of keeping women in the social positions in which God had placed them”. The *Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions* (24 May 1879 p969) reports on comments from George Webb Sandford on admitting women to the Society: “He knew they were eligible, but eligibility and being entitled to a thing were two different matters altogether . . . He for one would keep out ladies from the society, partly for the sake of the society itself, although he had a high estimate and regard for ladies in their proper place. It would be no pleasure to him to see three or four ladies in that room attending such a meeting, although they should be glad to meet them in the evening and enjoy their society; but men must be men, and he hoped women would long remain women, and would not unsex themselves by intruding into the sphere of the other sex.”

Another opposer, Atkinson Pickering of Hull was more concerned with protecting women's sensibilities: “there were matters connected with pharmacy with which it was not desirable that women should be connected with, matters which it was delicate for them to listen to, and articles they would have to deal with in which it was not fit they

Panel 2: Robert Hampson

Robert Hampson devoted 30 years of his life to being a reformer of the Pharmaceutical Society, spending 26 years as a member of its Council. Born in 1833, he studied in Manchester and, having given up medicine due to ill health, became a pharmaceutical chemist in 1864. Hampson fought for the reports of the proceedings of Council to be given more prominence and greater publicity in *The Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions*; for pharmacists to share in the compilation of the *British Pharmacopoeia*; for membership entitlement for all those who qualified by passing the examinations and for Benevolent Fund awards to be given according to merit rather than by voting.

Hampson is also remembered for his determined and consistent support for women, advocating their attendance at School of Pharmacy lectures and their membership of the Society. He was willing to put his beliefs into action, employing and training women in his business at St John Street Road, London, (including Isabella Skinner Clarke). A little of Hampson's character is discernable in a story told by Annie Neve*: “On one occasion when he was nearly cornered in a heated debate, Mr Hampson inquired challengingly, ‘Have you had Counsel's opinion?’ Someone from the anti-feminist majority, let us hope it was not the President, admitted that the Council had not taken legal advice. ‘Well,’ retorted Hampson, ‘I have,’ but astute diplomatist that he was, he did not disclose that the opinion had been adverse to his course.”

* Taken from *Pharmaceutical Journal and Pharmacist* 1926;117:375.

Panel 3: Why pharmacy should be recommended as a suitable job for women*

There is assuredly nothing alarming in this list of requirements. Latin, French, and arithmetic are required of most governesses, in addition to numerous other accomplishments which a chemist might well dispense with; botany is a favourite amusement with many young ladies who often gain no mean proficiency in it; while the only purely technical knowledge that has to be attained, is of a character which is seldom unattractive to any inquiring mind.

The ordinary salary of an efficient assistant is £30 or £40 per annum, with board and lodging; a small sum for a man, but amply sufficient to enable a young woman to maintain a highly respectable position, and to lay by some provision for the future. The hours of business in small towns, are usually from 8 or 9am, to 7, 8 or 9pm, according to season and to individual rules. In large towns, later hours are not unfrequent, and on Saturdays closing time may be deferred to midnight. Among the better class of chemists, no business is done on Sundays, beyond preparing indispensably required prescriptions during a limited part of the day, and where several assistants are employed, extra relaxations are obtained by the alternate sharing of extra duties.

*Taken from *The English Women's Review* 1868;(1):353.

should touch [apparently suppositories].” (*Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions* 1878;3:938) Some members were willing to accept women as associate members, because these could not be Council members and office holders (therefore women would have no influence on policy), but the majority, including George Webb Sandford, opposed women on principle.

Some of those supporting the women's cause were positive and highly critical of the opposition but, by 1879, the more widely held view was that the Society should acquiesce mainly on the grounds of inevitability — membership for women would come sooner or later and in the meantime the issue was preventing the Society from tackling other issues. John Mackay, Edinburgh, reluctantly accepting women, summed up this view saying that although he had his own ideas with regard to the admission of ladies to membership he could not hide from himself that there had been an immense deal of agitation about it and unless it was settled today there would probably be a great deal more, he was therefore disposed to settle the matter by voting for the admission of ladies. (*Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions* 1879;10:266)

It was clear that, at least in terms of academic ability, women were as capable as men, so there was no logical justification for withholding membership to the Society. Women were finally granted membership rights on 1 October 1879 with only the president, George Webb Sandford dissenting. At

this time, when women were finally admitted, Louisa Stammwitz and Rose Coombes Minshull had passed their Major Examinations alongside Isabella Skinner Clarke. As a result, Isabella Skinner Clarke and Rose Coombes Minshull became the first women members of the Society. Louisa Stammwitz applied the following year.

What happened next

Most of the of new women members went on to actively practise within the profession. Some, such as Margaret Buchanan (one of the founder members of the association in 1905 and the Society's first woman Council member) and Elsie Hooper Higgins, a talented academic, completed valuable and pioneering work. However, in spite of this, membership of the Society was not the solution to everything.

For the first 20 years of women's membership it seemed that the Council's original belief that few women would be interested in joining the profession was true. Although the 1869 register listed 183 women as running their own businesses, by 1900 only 40 were listed as such and by 1908 only 160 women were registered as qualified pharmacists.

Women in the profession continued to face difficulties and prejudice in obtaining both apprenticeships and jobs, especially in retail pharmacy. Often, they were driven to the more mechanical and less well paid tasks, such as supervising packed goods in wholesale houses, tablet making or routine dispensing in hospitals. Average salaries for women pharmacists were less than those of elementary school teachers or bank clerks. The more successful and better paid women were those who ran their own businesses so little had genuinely changed since the 1868 Act.

For most people the role of women in pharmacy was entirely unseen and usually unknown. Through the *Chemist and Druggist* a debate was instigated when, in the 12 December 1891 issue, there were comments on the lack of enthusiasm for entering pharmacy. The commentary quoted a well-known American druggist's claim that in spite of their abilities, customer prejudices would mean that “a woman in the store would kill the business unless she were chained to the prescription counter out of sight.”

In response, a review was published six months later and many women, including the pioneer members Rose Coombes Minshull (see Panel 4) and Louisa Stammwitz related their experiences. In particular, Louisa Stammwitz gave a lengthy analysis of the difficulties still facing women in the profession: “Pharmacy is undoubtedly a very suitable profession, or business — as you will — for women, but so long as ‘keeping shop’ involves loss of social status, few will go into business. In your article of December 12th you wonder why women prefer the medical profession to pharmacy, I think this loss of caste is one, if not the chief reason; another is the difficulty of obtaining business training, as chemists have hitherto, refused to employ

Panel 4: Description of work in a hospital pharmacy by Rose Coombes Minshull

As the result of many years' hospital work, I am decidedly of opinion that, certainly in women's and children's hospitals, a lady dispenser is the right woman in the right place. Of course she must know her work thoroughly, for she will find it to be more sharply criticised than a man's would be in the same position, keep well posted up in the current pharmaceutical literature, so as to have at her fingers' ends, when applied to, all that relates to new remedies, etc. (I supplemented my Major work with a course of analysis of food and drugs, and it has been of great value to me in many ways.)

She must be quick, and able to work amid noise (sometimes in our hall over 50 babies are in full cry at one time) and interruptions without getting flurried, and strong enough to cope with numbers and long hours. She must understand the management of stores, so as to keep her supplies up to the doctors' requirements and yet avoid overstocking. These are not unreasonable qualifications to ask from women, nor unusual ones to be found in them.

I have held my present appointment for many years, and during all that time my relations with the committees and medical staff have been extremely satisfactory, and I have never suffered any disadvantage from being a woman.

*From the 1892 review of women in pharmacy. *Chemist and Druggist* 1892;41:145–6.

women in their shops or take them as apprentices. At present few pass the pharmaceutical examinations, although many are employed as unqualified dispensers in hospitals. Most people would be surprised to learn how many women do hold dispensaries in hospitals” (*Chemist and Druggist* 1892;41:143–4).

Although they were now able to join the Society, by 1900 women found they still faced their own particular professional difficulties and it was the need to address these that helped motivate them to found their own society in 1905.

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