

Gregory (S) Mrs Edwards,
Rochester

DOCTOR OR DOCTRESS?

BY



SAMUEL GREGORY, A.M., M.D.,

SECRETARY OF THE NEW ENGLAND FEMALE MEDICAL COLLEGE.

(Box)



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BOSTON:

PUBLISHED BY THE TRUSTEES,

AND TO BE HAD AT THE COLLEGE, 21 EAST CANTON STREET.

1868.

TO EDITORS:—

The writer is desirous to obtain an expression of opinion, from competent authorities, for or against the views presented in these pages. Editors of newspapers and magazines, who may allude to the subject in their columns, will, therefore, confer a special favor by sending copies of publications containing such paragraphs to the "New England Female Medical College, Boston, Mass." The press is a potent agency in moulding forms of speech, and if Editors, whenever they have occasion to speak of a female physician in a newspaper item, should employ the feminine form of title, it would aid much in bringing it into general use.

S. G.

Boston, Oct. 20, 1868.

DOCTOR OR DOCTRESS?

As it may now be regarded a settled question that women are to constitute a portion of the medical profession, it becomes a matter of importance that female physicians should have an appropriate and convenient title. The term Doctor being the one in familiar use to indicate a practitioner of medicine, there has been a natural tendency to apply it to all physicians, male and female. But there are weighty reasons in favor of a distinctive title for women, indicating in a single word their profession and their sex; and such a title our language affords, in the correlative term Doctress.

The distinction of sex by a difference of termination in words is both elegant and convenient, as emperor, empress; prince, princess; actor, actress; master, mistress. The absurdity of ignoring the feminine form of these and many other words, and using the compound term female emperor, or Emperor Eugenie, &c., would be obvious to all; but it would be no more absurd than to ignore the word Doctress, and employ on all occasions the term female doctor, woman doctor, and like expressions.

Cultivated nations are not afflicted with such a poverty of language as to compel them to use the same appellation for both sexes, as will appear from the following examples:—

	<i>Masculine.</i>	<i>Feminine.</i>
GREEK, - - - -	{ Therapeutes, Iatros,	Therapeutris. Iatria.
LATIN, - - - -	Doctor,	Doctrix.
ITALIAN, - - - -	Dottore,	Dottoressa.
SPANISH, - - - -	Doctor,	Doctora.
GERMAN, - - - -	Doctor,	Doctorin.
FRENCH, - - - -	Docteur,	Doctoresse.
ENGLISH, - - - -	Doctor,	Doctress.

As a prefix, Doctress (abbreviated Drss.) is much better than the clumsy circumlocutions employed to inform people that a doctor is of the female sex, as Drss. Brown, instead of Dr. Elizabeth Brown, Miss Dr. Brown, or Mrs. Dr. Brown; which latter may mean the wife of a doctor of that name, or a female physician. And if we say Mrs. Dr. Brown, consistency requires that we say Mr. Dr. Brown; one is as proper as the other.

There is much in a name. The title, Doctor, is masculine; it has a masculine sound, and carries the idea of a masculine occupation—a fact readily seized upon by opposers of female physicians. For example, a Boston doctor, who makes a specialty of treating the diseases peculiar to women, and loses no opportunity of pronouncing against his female competitors in that department of practice, complains of their “assuming medical honors and responsibilities and masculine appellations;” thus connecting these ideas together and implying that the occupation, as well as the appellation, is masculine. There is no doubt that the use of the title of Doctor by women has done much to prejudice people against female physicians, and retard the cause in which they are engaged.

It is distasteful to most persons to apply to a lady a “masculine appellation,” or to salute her with a “How do you do, Doctor?” and hence most women physicians are known only by their original title of Miss or Mrs., and will continue to be until they adopt a feminine style of address. They thereby lose the advantage which a medical title would give them in a community. But suppose everybody should call a woman physician, Doctor, and she should call herself, Doctor, she would only be a *Doctress* still, and would know neither more nor less than if called by her right name.

Physicians make themselves known by their professional signs. It is often difficult to put Christian names in full, together with the initials of one or two middle names, on a door-plate; and so, for example, Josephine Maria Warren, M.D., puts out her sign as Dr. J. M. Warren, or J. M. Warren, M.D.; and Dr. Warren is supposed by passers-by to be a man. But if she puts it out as Drss. Warren, everybody sees at a glance that a woman physician is to be found within; and ladies who have adopted this style are thereby promoting their own interest, as well as the public convenience.

To make Doctor a word of doubtful gender and put out ambiguous signs would, as remarked by a writer on a following page, occasion much public inconvenience and many annoyances, both ludicrous and serious. Men in search of male physicians, for special consultations, might be ushered into the presence of lady practitioners; and women in search of physicians of their own sex might fail to find them, because there was nothing to indicate who or where they were; and the servant who was sent in haste to “fetch a doctor” might bring one of the wrong sex, because, in the hurry of the moment, the word male or female was omitted.

A medical lady, whose sign does not indicate her sex, remarked to the writer that a gentleman called and inquired of her, if the Doctor was in? He was, of course, misled by the door-plate. Another lady of the profession said that she was called to a young girl, who was sick; and the mother introduced her as Doctor——. The girl looked at her, and replied, “You are not a doctor; you are a *woman*.” The little patient could not reconcile the contradiction. Had the professional lady been introduced as *Doctress*——, the whole matter would have been explained to the child’s satisfaction.

Some women physicians object to the title of Doctress as being less dignified and indicative of learning and skill than Doctor. On the same grounds they might object to the word woman, because it has not till recently been associated with these attainments. The word Doctress itself is as significant of learning, and every way as respectable, as Doctor, originating from the same honorable source, the Latin *doceo*, to teach; and the true course for the female portion of the profession is, to take their own title and give it reputation by their success, and not build upon men's foundations. If they cannot stand upon their own merits, they cannot stand at all. Others dislike the term Doctress, because it is a little longer and not quite so easily written and spoken as Doctor. For the same reason they might discard the word Mistress, and make Mister a title of common gender, designating a man and his wife as Mr. John Smith and Mr. Sarah Smith, as they say, Dr. John Smith, and Dr. Sarah Smith.

But probably the chief objection to the title is, that it sounds a little odd, and is not so familiar to the tongue and ear as its correlative, Doctor. But the objection of novelty may as justly be brought against the medical woman herself; for the diplomatized Doctress is but a new-comer in the world, and the public will as readily become accustomed to the title as to the newly recognized personage.

This difficulty as to the title of medical women has been felt by many of the most intelligent and judicious friends of the cause of female medical education, and especially by refined and cultivated ladies.

Mrs. L. H. Sigourney, in a letter to the writer, in 1853, earnestly objected to the use of the title Doctor by women physicians, and remarked, "It is neither distinctive nor feminine, and exposes them to ridicule."

Mrs. Almira Lincoln Phelps, so long known for her success as a teacher of young ladies, and for her valuable publications, wrote as follows:—

"I prefer the term Doctress to that of Doctor for a lady, though in general I am opposed to feminine nouns as expressive of certain common qualities or conditions. For example, in general, I use the term poet and author, as I do that of Christian or educator, for either sex; but here it seems necessary to distinguish, and I think Doctress better. It softens down the fact, which has been very naturally a *stubborn one* to gentlemen of the medical profession; namely, that ladies come into it."

Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, who has done so much for the cause of woman, says, in "Godey's Lady's Book":—

"How absurd to fancy that *female physician* elevates woman above the style of *doctress*! The latter is a pleasant, soft word, explaining the rank and the sex, mingling, in our idea of the woman and her vocation, tenderness with respect. . . . Why not abandon this clumsy and unpleasant periphrase of *female physician*, and adopt the true style, *doctress*, which could so conveniently be given on the address to a lady of the medical profession?"

Prof. Charles D. Cleveland, of Philadelphia, an excellent authority, says, in a letter to the writer:—

"I fully accede to your views as to the title of Doctress for the female physician; it is the only proper one in my estimation."

Prof. Alpheus Crosby, late principal of the State Normal School for young ladies, at Salem, an earnest laborer in this enterprise, and the first to introduce a *Doctress* to lecture to the young ladies of a Normal School, thus expresses his views upon this subject:—

“In respect to the use of terms, I have no hesitation in preferring the word, recognized in our Dictionaries, and already becoming familiar in use, *Doctress*. The adoption of the term Doctor as the title of a lady would lead to endless mistakes; and if female physicians become, as I trust they will, common among us, would unquestionably be set aside by the very necessities of language. . . . If the distinction of sex is hereafter to exist in the world, must we not have terms to mark this distinction? Must we not have such words as mother, daughter, girl, sister; or would any prefer that we should rather say, female father, female son, &c.”

The late Rev. Wm. Jenks, D.D., of this city, known as one of the most learned and judicious men of his day, wrote, in 1860, as follows:—

“While I congratulate you sincerely on that striking success which has attended your persevering labors in reference to the ‘Female Medical College,’ I must say that I have, for a considerable time, felt the difficulty on which you are disposed to consult me. Often in my family, since the subject of medical instruction for the female as well as male portion of the community has been before the public, I have expressed regret that no distinction of sex was made in the appellation given to the professors of the healing art; but that the term Doctor should be applied promiscuously. It gives me pleasure, therefore, to find that other minds have also labored with this difficulty, and are becoming ready to remove it. And I now see no reason why we should not, with our latest lexicographers, admit the use of the term *Doctress*, and apply it in all its discriminating forms. Use would soon make it familiar, and use is the empire of language—‘*jus et norma loquendi*.’”

In regard to lexicographers, Webster, Worcester, and others declare against the use of Doctor as a noun of common gender, by giving the feminine form, *Doctress*. The latter has, of course, precisely the same meaning as the former, except in the matter of sex; as Worcester defines it, “*Doctress*, a female doctor.”

A portion of the substance of these pages appeared in the *Boston Transcript* in 1860; and an editorial article in the *Boston Journal*, at the time, spoke as follows:—

“What title shall a female physician assume? has become a much mooted question among those of the gentler sex who have undergone the course of study and investigation necessary to render them adepts in the healing art. Some, having deprived man of the exclusive right to attend the sick professionally, would also forbid him the sole use of the title of ‘Doctor,’ and prefix that appellation to their own patronymics; while others, more conservative, and desirous of a more distinctive title, prefer that of ‘*Doctress*.’ We think the latter title the most befitting, as well as most accordant with general usage in such matters. In fact, unless this title is adopted by female physicians, many ludicrous as well as annoying incidents will inevitably happen to physicians of both sexes. The simple title of Doctor would afford no clue to the gender of the person claiming it, and where a similarity of names, male and female, exists, or there is ignorance in regard to the Christian names of the parties, mistakes will unavoidably happen. It will readily be seen that confusion must occur in many ways, if the term ‘Doctor’ is used indiscriminately by both sexes. A knowledge of the sex to which professional people belong is indispensable to the smooth working of the social machinery, and we think our lady friends who have been admitted into the ranks of *Æsculapius* will be very unwise if they merge their individuality in the hitherto masculine title of Doctor.

“We think the main objection to the use of the term *Doctress* lies in its present novelty. It has at first an odd sound; but let it once come into use to designate female physicians, and

the idea that it is not so dignified and suggestive of learning would quickly disappear. As the writer above quoted truthfully remarks, the reputation attaching to any name or title depends altogether on the character of those who bear it; and if they deserve the respect and confidence of the public, 'Doctresses' will find that they stand on a perfect equality with 'Doctors,' while the distinction of sex, which can never be lost sight of in the social economy without inconvenience and annoyance, will be preserved."

As women have had so many obstacles to encounter in entering the profession, it is very natural that they should have been inclined to borrow a title already made honorable by their male predecessors, and therefore, as they believed, best adapted to help them forward in their struggles. But, if there was any weight in this consideration in the beginning, they have now achieved such a degree of success, and are so firmly established in the profession, that they can assume and dignify a title of their own.

It is but just to the ladies of the profession that they should have a title exclusively their own, and not be compelled to share one with dentists, apothecaries, cattle curers, professors of divinity, professors of law, and male physicians of all descriptions and specialties. It is but just to the gentlemen of the profession that their hard-sounding and hitherto masculine title should be allowed to continue distinctive of the sterner sex, and not be diluted down to a half-and-half appellation of uncertain gender, requiring everybody to speak and write of "male doctors" and "female doctors," "men doctors" and "women doctors." And even the clumsy compounds, women physicians and women doctors, are ambiguous, meaning either women who are doctors, or men who doctor women.

The New England Female Medical College, in Boston, with which the writer has for the past twenty years been connected, as Secretary and one of the Trustees, confers its degree as "Doctor of Medicine," or "Doctress of Medicine," according to the preference of its graduates. The Trustees and the Faculty regard the feminine title as the most appropriate; but as the usage is not yet settled they confer the degree in either form. The familiar letters, M.D., indicate alike the masculine and the feminine title, being the initials of the Latin, *Medicinæ Doctor* (Doctor of Medicine), and *Medicinæ Doctrix* (Doctress of Medicine). Should the managers of the other Female Medical Colleges, on considering the matter, think it desirable to unite in securing uniformity, and establishing a feminine title for female physicians, the officers of this college will cordially coöperate.

Colleges and Seminaries for young women, in which female physicians are employed, can do much to aid in establishing the right usage. The Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, at South Hadley, has been supplied with graduates from the New England Female Medical College for the past seven years. The lady fills the double position of Teacher of anatomy, physiology and hygiene, and Resident Physician. She is not recognized by any professional title, but is simply called Miss, — as if a medical gentleman should be spoken of and addressed as Mister; which, of course, would give no intimation of his professional education or duties. The style of "Doctor ——," and "The Doc-

tor," could hardly be considered appropriate for a lady, in an institution whose aim is to teach the proper use of language; and that of "Doctress ——," and "The Doctress," has not yet been adopted. A similar state of things in this respect exists in the Vassar College, for young women, at Poughkeepsie, N. Y., where also a graduate of the New England Female Medical College holds a like position. If, now, these institutions would adopt the feminine style of address for their Resident Physicians, and thus give the influence of their example, and render the appellation familiar to the hundreds of young women whom they educate and send out over the country, it would aid greatly in establishing the correct use of medical titles, and in elevating woman in her profession of healer of the sick.

That the use of the feminine form of the title will prevail there cannot be a doubt. It is dictated alike by good taste and the necessities of social life. Doctor is a household word, in too constant use to be encumbered with adjectives or proper names; and so it will be with Doctress. People in distress and peril will not use circumlocutions or ambiguous terms, when a single word will unmistakably express their ideas. All that is needed is to give the right usage a start. Let women physicians have a womanly title; put it into use; speak it, write it, print it; use will soon make it familiar and agreeable; and the skill and success of its bearers will make it significant and honorable.

In closing, the writer desires to say to any of his lady friends in the profession, who may dissent from his views, that nothing is farther from his aim than to deprive them of any titular honors, or throw any obstacle in the way of their success — the very opposite being his purpose. Nor does he wish to compel any one to adopt the title recommended; but his hope is that, by general usage, it will soon become so popular that everybody, in the profession and out, will give it the preference. If, however, after a full canvass of the subject, the learned umpires in the use of language and the public voice should decide that there ought not to be any distinction of sex in the case, but that Doctor should be the common title of all physicians, male and female, the writer will cheerfully acquiesce in the decision.

NEW ENGLAND FEMALE MEDICAL COLLEGE.

The Annual Term of the Institution commences uniformly on the first Wednesday of November, and continues seventeen weeks; the Twenty-first Annual Term beginning on Wednesday, Nov. 4, 1868. The College has free scholarships for students needing assistance. Catalogues and all particulars can be obtained by addressing the Secretary.