Chapter XI

The Changing Face Of The Medical Student

In comparison with the other medical schools in the United States, the Creighton School of Medicine has a remarkable record of encouraging the enrollment and education of minority students and women. The very first class of 33 freshman students included Miss Kate Drake. The University student records of that time were so detailed and extensive as they are today but consisted mainly of a name written in a book. For this reason, the only information we have about Miss Drake is that her home was somewhere in Nebraska. Evidently she did not remain more than one year in the Medical School. Why she did not continue and what happened to her afterwards is not recorded. The acceptance of Miss Kate Drake was a landmark step in Catholic college history because she was the first woman ever admitted to any one of the 28 American Jesuit colleges or universities. The John A. Creighton School of Medicine graduated its first woman physician in 1894. Since she was not listed as a student in the opening class, we must assume she was a transfer student although we have no information about her earlier history. But from what we do know, she may be regarded as an early women's rights advocate. She graduated as Dr. C. B. Offersen without indication that she was a woman. The use of initials only for first names may have been deliberate to disguise her gender. We do know, however, that when her name is listed in 1913 as one of the medical school graduates, she is located in South Omaha and is also identified as Mrs. M. Ziegler. The first woman graduate to complete all her medical school training at Creighton University was Anna Marie Griffith, who graduated from the Medical School in 1898 in a class of 13.

When the Schools of Pharmacy and Dentistry opened in 1905, both had women in their initial classes. The School of Law opened in 1904 without women students but did graduate their first woman attorney in 1916. The College of Commerce, Accounting and Finance (later the College of Business Administration) opened in 1920 with an initial enrollment of 66 men and 8 women. It had to be otherwise with the undergraduate student classes. It must be remembered that in founding Creighton, Edward and Mary Lucretia had identified it as a Catholic school for boys. In that decade of the 1870's, a college education for women was still a new idea. But the twentieth century brought more demand for this, and with a good representation of women in their professional schools, Creighton University saw a need to provide more for women undergraduate students. This has obviously now been accomplished, but it was done in steps over some period of time.

The College of Arts (later the College of Arts and Sciences) agreed to start summer sessions in 1913 with women seeking degrees in teaching which would be equal to those of men. Undergraduate women were first allowed on campus during the academic year of 1919 when the 'university offered teachers' courses in the various college divisions. Offered exclusively that year, the courses were repeated in 1923.

Anna Marie Griffith (M.D. 1896).
Beginning in 1925, agreements were reached between Creighton and the women's colleges in Omaha by which they would become the coed college of Creighton with women then eligible for degrees from Creighton. Duchesne College became affiliated in 1925, Saint Joseph's Nursing School in 1928, and the College of Saint Mary in 1929.

A seemingly final solution to the continuing demand for female education was reached in 1931 with the creation of University College. Through it, women could receive a Creighton degree in Arts, Sciences, Commerce and Journalism. The University College was initially started as a division to take care of teachers' courses and not simply to enroll undergraduate women students. However, a continual enrollment of coeds led to what was described by former registrar Jack Williams as a “paper separation” with both women and men going to the same classes and reporting to the same dean but still being considered enrolled in different schools.

With the growth of University College, Creighton’s affiliation with Duchesne and Saint Mary’s was dropped in 1937. The nursing program with St. Joseph’s was continued, with Nursing becoming a university department in 1955 and enlarged to a college in 1971.

By 1933 Creighton was receiving comments from outside sources on its efforts to incorporate women students into its academic structure. The female aviator Amelia Earhart, in a visit to Omaha, expressed a strong desire to see Creighton continue its receptive attitude toward women in the professions. In 1899 the John A. Creighton College of Medicine graduated 3 women, Mrs. Augusta B. Engstedt, Miss A. Palmer, and Miss A. G. Wiley. In the class of 1902, there were 6 women in a class of 37, one of whom, Marie Hansen Morse, was reported still living in 1978, being then more than 100 years old.

The first known Black student appears in a photograph of medical students in the Histological Laboratory. The picture appeared in the 1900 catalog. The first known Black graduate was William M. Gordon, who graduated in the class of 1901 (although his picture is included with the class of 1900.) He was from Nebraska, and as a 1913 list of past graduates, was shown as still being located in Omaha.

The first known woman faculty member at Creighton University was also in the College of Medicine, Mattie Laughlin Arthur, M.D., shown in the graduating class photo of 1901, which also included two women graduates in a class of 28. Dr. Arthur served as an Assistant in Anatomy.
The first Puerto Rican medical student accepted at Creighton was a Miss Carmen Chavez who was awarded a four-year medical school scholarship from Puerto Rico, and she selected Creighton as the medical school to attend. She was in the freshman class of 1946.11

The 1920's and the depression decade of the 1930’s brought a decrease in the relative number of women students in medical schools across the United States. There seems to have been a lower percentage applying, perhaps from some impression that women students were unfairly taking a male student’s place and after graduation might choose to get married, have a family, and not practice. Whatever the cause, there were at least some women students in almost every class at our Medical School.

One of our graduates, Dr. Elinor Marsh (M. D. 1942), remembers being enrolled in the University College as a premed student because the Arts and Sciences was still for men only. Few activities, especially athletics, were available for women. Dr. Marsh was listed in a yearbook as Director of Women’s Athletics for teaching one hour of swimming each week. After graduation, this lack of women’s facilities and activities made her ineligible for full membership in the American Association of University Women.

However, Dr. Marsh said she noticed no discrimination because of her gender: “We were treated like ladies and expected to act the same. We wore dresses or sweaters and skirts and, always, high heels and hose.”

Although most people believe now, as in her day, that women medical students experience disadvantages, Dr. Marsh disagrees: “I think the ones in school when I was did not, because Creighton admitted the ‘feminine’ type as opposed to the ‘mannish’.” She recalls two exceptions:

Our Anatomy professor chose me, for a short time, to use as an example. It was not enough that I knew today’s lesson. I had to know tomorrow’s also. He ended up giving me the second highest grade in the class. One surgery professor was also against women in medicine, but we just had him one hour a week for ten weeks.

Three women in a class of sixty (5%) graduated in Dr. Marsh’s class. A fourth entered as a freshman and did not continue, going on to graduate from another medical school. Medical School admission in Dr. Marsh’s day was perhaps easier than it is today, high grades and the required credits being the main criteria. But, as today, Creighton looked for a broadly-educated student, rather than concentrating solely on high grades in the sciences.

In spite of the easier entrance requirements, attrition rates were higher, especially in the first year: “I don’t remember the number in my class who did not make it past the first year, but there were many.”
Also expressing good classmate and faculty support was Dr. Rita Perll (M.D. 1944). She noted the following:

With a total of only about twenty girls in medical school during our attendance at Creighton University, Margaret Storkan (the other girl in my class) and I felt very fortunate to have the support and acceptance of our classmates. We shared many joys, disappointments and grief at times, but we gained strength knowing we had our colleagues behind us.

In 1945 Harvard Medical School announced they had admitted their first female medical student.13 That same year The Creightonian noted the Creighton School of Medicine had enrolled 14 women, the largest number to date enrolled at the same time.14

Beginning after World War II, the proportion of women students in medical schools in the United States has gradually and steadily increased. A writer, Steven Jonas, calculated (from figures provided by the Association of American Medical Colleges) that in 1929 4.5% of entering medical students were women; by 1950 this was 5.3%, 1960 was 7%, 1970 was 11.3% and in 1975 was 23.7%.15 The percentage for Creighton Medical School has not been calculated so precisely but has followed a similar increase, and currently women represent approximately one-third of the Medical School student body. This gradual increase has led many to expect that half of our nation's physicians will be women by sometime in the next century.

Women students were making a good showing academically during World War II when Creighton Medical School had a wartime accelerated program. Forty-four seniors were graduated in March 1943, and the best four-year academic average was held by Dr. Agnes F. Jennings. For this, she received the Doctor Adolph Sach scholarship prize.16

In February 1974 The Creightonian reported on some informal discussion sessions held for undergraduates on "Women in Medicine" and "Women in Law." One of our recent graduates, Dr. Mary Walton Conti (M.D. 1970), made a good pitch for more women to study medicine, noting that the "old maid myth about women doctors has faded. It is now possible to combine medicine, home, and family." Combining studies with family had already received a positive comment from Dean Joseph Holthaus during a 1971 interview. When asked...
about students becoming pregnant, he reported that they could go right on with their studies, could have leave of absence as necessary, and "we would make it possible for these women to come back at any time."

When desegregation became a national issue in the 1950's and 1960's, minorities were encouraged to enter medical school. Prominent notice was given in The Creightonian beginning in 1961 of National Medical-Sloan Foundation Scholarships available to 10 qualified "Negro men for four-year full medical school expenses." Of a more immediate nature, the School of Medicine, beginning in 1977, sponsored a pilot program called "Saturdays for Science." This was a five-week program designed for Black high school students and conducted by the School of Medicine faculty in Criss 1. Its purpose was to stimulate an interest in science in young Blacks who otherwise might never have considered college, let alone a career in a scientific field such as medicine. The organizers of the program were Dr. Donal F. Magee and Dr. Henry H. Gale, both with the Department of Physiology and Pharmacology; Dr. Robert F. Hensley, Department of Medicine; and Dr. William T. Niemer, Department of Anatomy. Later, in addition, other medical faculty members staffed the program.

In September 1971 Creighton sponsored a convocation on methods of increasing the enrollment of minority students in health education programs. It was attended by faculty members and persons from civic and government groups. The speakers included representatives from the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare; the Josiah Macy Foundation, which assists minority students; Vernon Smith, a Howard University medical student who was President of the National Student Medical Association; and Dr. Andrew Thomas of Chicago, representing Project '75, a National Medical Association Program designed to increase interest in medicine among black students. Dr. Thomas, himself a black physician, described Creighton University as "one of the brighter lights in the United States" in admitting minority students to medical school. "It is clear that Creighton's administration is committed to the idea of increasing the number of minority medical students," he said, and "the fact that 11 percent of this year's Medical School freshmen are minority group members is a sign of this."

By April 1972 the Nebraska Medical Journal was reporting that:

Nearly 75 Omaha area high school and college minority students attended a recent Health Careers Opportunity Conference held at Creighton University. Speakers at the gathering included Dr. Claude Organ, Chairman of the Department of Surgery at Creighton's Medical School, as well as Dr. William...
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Felman, Regional Director of Project '75, a federally sponsored program to help colleges obtain a 12 percent minority representation by 1975. Those in attendance were encouraged to consider a career in the health sciences. They were given information concerning scholarships available, facilities available, and opportunities they might expect to encounter as practicing professionals.17

In September 1972 the Creighton Medical School announced that it had received a grant of $72,295 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, New Jersey. The grant provided for scholarships and loans to be made over the next four years to students from rural backgrounds, women students, and minority students.18

By 1974 Creighton had established a Minority Affairs Office for Health Sciences. Conferences for undergraduate minority students were being organized by Evelyn Smith, the Minority Recruitment and Retention Director for Health Sciences.19 By that September, the Director of the Minority Affairs Office, John Pierce, noted that the fall semester had seen enrolled 26 minority students in the School of Medicine, 15 in the School of Dentistry, 5 in the School of Pharmacy and 12 in the School of Nursing.20

Another grant of $3,000 was received that year from the General Mills Foundation. The money was designated to be used for the educational development of minority students in Creighton’s Health Sciences schools, and the Foundation had agreed to contribute similar amounts in future years, subject to evaluation of Creighton University’s utilization of the funds.21

The best, and still continuing, effort to enroll minority students in our medical school began in 1975, and much credit for its success goes to Dr. John Elder, Professor of Pharmacology, who has been Director of the Program since its beginning. The Creighton Alumni gave the following report in 1983:

Dr. John Elder and his Creighton faculty colleagues are batting 770 after 8 years in the “Post-Baccalaureate League” preparing college graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds for acceptance into medical schools. Since the program was started at Creighton in 1975, 154 students have completed the program and 77 percent of these have gone on to gain admittance to medical school.

“This is the basic purpose of the program,” Dr. Elder explains. “What we do is take students who are intelligent and motivated enough to be successful in medicine or dentistry, but who, for whatever reasons, came up too short in grade point averages and MCAT scores to be accepted by a medical school.”

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Each year some 20 college graduates begin what Dr. Elder calls a “lock-step, six-hour-a-day curriculum,” running from the third week in September to the second week in April. This curriculum is designed to correct deficiencies in biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics. These courses are taught by faculty members in the College of Arts and Sciences, and members of the English Department also conduct courses to improve reading and writing skills. “Each Department reviews basic materials from top to bottom in that particular discipline,” according to Dr. Elder. “the MCAT examination is on fundamental knowledge, nothing wildly esoteric.”

“The program is funded by the Federal Health Career Opportunities Program, and all the money we get goes for instruction,” Dr. Elder said. The aim of the HCOP is to attempt to bring to parity the representation of minority/disadvantaged students in the health professions with their representation in the general population. Funding for the program covers the students’ tuition and books; food and housing they pay themselves.

California usually has a large representation in the Post-Bac. Classes and students come from coast to coast, according to Elder, who added that these students generally are highly motivated. “At this stage of their education, they definitely know they want to be physicians, and they have to uproot themselves to come to Omaha. A student has to be ready and motivated to succeed in the Post-Bac Program because it’s nothing but pure work.”

He added that many of the students through the years have remarked that the specialized focus of the Post-Bac classes and the reinforcement from their classmates in the program are what makes the difference between the Creighton program and the undergraduate classes at their various schools or colleges.26

At the Student National Medical Association Spring Meeting held in Detroit in 1984, Dr Elder was given a special award citing the national impact of the school’s Post-Baccalaureate Program. The award was presented to Dr. Elder on behalf of the Student Association by Lewis Gamarra (M.D. 1986) of Bethel, Connecticut, and Daphne Favroth (M.D. 1986) of Newark, California. They were among the “graduates” of the Post-Bac Program and were preparing to enter their junior year in the Creighton School of Medicine.27 The 77 percent success rate of this special program was remarkable enough but by 1990 that overall figure had risen to 85 percent.28

Additional efforts began in the 1980’s to reach down to minority high school students to create more interest in medical careers. An unusual step in this direction was created by our Family Practice Department in 1987. As reported by the Program Director, Dr. Diane Dodendorf,
Four minority high school students will receive hands-on experience in medical research as part of a summer apprentice program offered by the School of Medicine's Family Practice Department. During the eight-week apprenticeships, students will help care for and collect data on patients suffering from hypertension. In addition, the students will attend Health Sciences classes and complete reading assignments. The apprentice's work will be supervised by health care professionals.

The program is open to minority students currently enrolled as sophomores, juniors, or seniors from Omaha area high schools. Apprentices will work 30 hours per week at $3.40 per hour. A grant to fund this program came from the National Institute of Health.

Beginning that year and continuing since have been other Health Career Workshops for minority junior and senior high school students. These are scheduled for Saturdays from 8:00 A.M. to 2:30 P.M., with a lunch included, and the workshops focus on exposing high school minority students to the health professions through hands-on experience.

It is evident that as we enter our second 100 years, we can be sure that our efforts and success to involve women and minorities will be continued. No wonder Creighton University School of Medicine continues to receive every year an amazing number of applications. It is known that we operate without prejudice, and give fair consideration to every applicant who seeks us out.
References

4. Annual Announcement of theCreighton University College of Medicine, 1931-1932, p. 48.