

Women and pharmacy

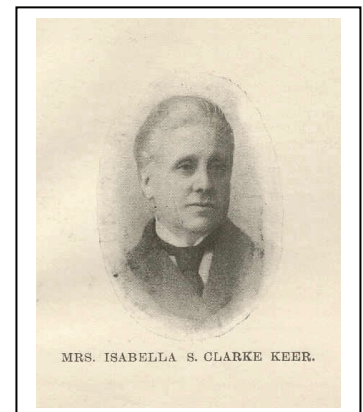
The membership debate

Women have always been involved in the production and administration of medicines. However, in the history of the Pharmaceutical Society, founded in 1841, the status of female pharmacists was not clear from the start. When Elizabeth Garrett (afterwards Mrs Elizabeth Garrett Anderson) attended lectures at the Society's School of Pharmacy in the 1860s, the Society's Council responded by passing a resolution prohibiting women in the school.

The Pharmacy Act of 1868 required all practising pharmacists to register with the Society. Most of the 223 women in the first compulsory Register of 1869 (1.9% of the total) had qualified for inclusion because they had been in business before August 1st 1868. It was not particularly unusual for women to take over businesses established by their fathers or husbands.

From 1869, women took the Society's exams alongside their male counterparts. Fanny Deacon (nee Potter) of Fleckney, Leicestershire was the first women to pass the "Modified" exam after the 1868 Act. Alice Vickery was the first women to qualify as a Chemist and Druggist by passing the Society's Minor exam in June 1873. But, unlike the male candidates on the pass list, they were not allowed to apply for membership of the Society. They could work as pharmacists, but had no rights in the Society and therefore no role to play in the regulation of the profession.

The status of women pharmacists emerged as a major issue in the mid-1870s, splitting the Society's male membership. Isabella Clarke and Rose Minshull had both passed the Society's Preliminary, Minor and Major exams. They made repeated applications for membership from 1875 onwards. Isabella Clarke opened her own shop in 1876, but was still denied full membership privileges. The Annual General Meeting of 1878 passed a motion by only two votes that it was undesirable for women to be admitted to the Society. Council finally agreed that women should become members in 1879. Ironically, some Council members seem to have finally given in to end the debate, or "to avoid further agitation" as one put it, rather than through any widely-held ethical belief that women ought to be allowed equal rights.



The changing workforce

In the late nineteenth century, although the number of women in the pharmaceutical workforce increased, with many working as dispensers in hospitals and other institutions, or as assistants in shops, the number of women on the statutory register fell.

However, the proportion of female pharmacist in the profession grew steadily through the twentieth century. In 1905, the 195 female pharmacists on Register represented 1.2% of 15,948 total. By 1945 about 10% of pharmacists were female. This had grown to 18% by 1959, and 36% in 1984. Since 2001, there have been more women than men on the Register and their role in the profession is firmly established. The latest figures (2004) show 24,119 female pharmacists on the Register which is 52% of 46,384 total.



As the twentieth century progressed, woman also began to gain a foothold within the Society, reflecting the growth of women in the workforce. In 1918, Margaret Buchanan became the first female member of Council. In 1924, Agnes Borrowman joined the Society's board of examiners. Jean Kennedy Irvine became the first woman President of the Pharmaceutical Society in 1947. Over the last fifteen years, five of the Presidents of the Council of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society have been women.

Mrs Jean Kennedy Irvine by Norman Hepple A.R.A., 1957

The National Association of Women Pharmacists

On Thursday June 15th 1905, a group of women pharmacists met at 5 Endsleigh Street in London. Their aim was to establish an Association of Women Pharmacists. The group's objectives would be to discuss questions relating to women's employment, establish a register of locums and of all qualified women, and the "furtherance of social intercourse". Members had to hold one of the Society's certificates and pay 5 shillings if they were a Society member, or 10 shillings if they were not. Fifty women joined immediately. Isabella Clarke was the Association's first President.

This first meeting, described in *The Chemist and Druggist* as "a meeting both historical and novel", was focussed on the problems of women trying to find pharmacy employment. The Association had concerns about the availability of suitable employment for women, and about the conditions under which they were expected to work.

The Association held their first public meeting on October 17th 1905. One hundred women and 12 men heard Mrs Louise Creighton, who had been the first President of the Union of Women Workers, speak on "The Present Responsibilities of Women."

By 1912, Margaret Buchanan, the Association's President, claimed that the group "included practically every woman practising pharmacy". In 1918, the committee recognised that there was definite interest beyond London, and branches were established in other cities. The Association became the National Association of Women Pharmacists (NAWP) in the same year.



Noel Jones' original design for NAWP's badge, 1955

NAWP has maintained its original objectives throughout the century, applying them to contemporary issues. In 1923 the Association established a loan scheme to "afford assistance to members of the Association in cases of distress, illness or other emergency." During the Second World War, the Association's Employment Bureau worked closely with Central Pharmaceutical War Committee to help place women pharmacists. NAWP's first weekend conference was held in 1967 and one of its aims, to help married women pharmacists to return to work, continued as an important objective. In 1991, the NAWP *Women in Pharmacy* pack was published as a careers guide for all pharmacists. 1999 saw the launch of a mentoring scheme to provide careers support for peers.

Today NAWP members meet nationally and regionally to discuss topics of professional interest. A regular Newsletter and a programme of conferences and study days keeps members informed. The Association is also a voice of pharmacy in the wider arena of women's affairs, with links to bodies including the Women Returners Network, the Women's National Commission, and the Association of Women in Science & Engineering.

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