

A Quota of Four: The First Women Graduates of the Medical School

By Ron Sims, Special Collections Librarian (now retired)

In honor of [National Women's History Month](#), the Galter Library is pleased to honor the first four female Northwestern MD graduates following the initiation of co-education at the medical school in 1926.

From the founding of the medical school in 1859, a debate concerning the admission of women had been questioned and tabled multiple times by the medical school faculty. A brief experiment allowing admittance for women occurred in the fall of 1869.*

The "Campaign for a Greater Northwestern" began in 1919, at which time the University purchased nine acres of land along Lake Michigan in the near north side Streeterville neighborhood. With the energies of then University President, Walter Dill Scott and a league of alumni, friends and faculty, plus major gifts from Mrs. A. Montgomery Ward and Miss Marjorie Montgomery Ward, a new medical center housing the dental and medical schools became a reality.

The Medical Council was requested to state its policy on co-education by the University administration. With a slight majority vote, the announcement that women would be admitted was made on May 31, 1924 and the first women students registered in the fall of 1926.

A quota of four women students was set for admission--four being the number needed for an anatomical dissecting team. Verna Anne Christophel, Elizabeth Adrienne Sirmay, Edna Mae Ward, and Frances Catherine Wynekoop began their medical studies. All except Wynekoop completed the required 5 years. Vera Blanche Slagerman entered with advanced standing as a 3rd year student in 1929, replacing Wynekoop.



*Medical School Class of 1930/1931***

The First Quota of Four



Verna Anne Christophel was born in Chicago in 1905. Her father, Dr. Walter Christophel was in the medical school class of 1909. She attended public schools in her hometown of Mishawaka, Indiana, completing that portion of her education in 1922. Continuing her studies at Oberlin College in zoology and pre-medicine, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1926. She was awarded an MD from Northwestern following an internship at St. Francis Hospital in Evanston in 1931.

Dr. Christophel was the first woman MD graduate on June 15, 1931 (the other women graduated in August 1931). Dr. Christophel went on to maintain a private practice with her father in Mishawaka. She died on January 18, 1973.

Elizabeth Adrienne Sirmay was born in Raab, Hungary, in 1899. She and her parents immigrated to the United States in 1905 and settled in Chicago. Dr. Sirmay's general education began in the Chicago public schools. After graduation from high school in 1917, she attended Chicago Normal College (now Chicago State University) where she received a teaching diploma in 1919. She was later employed by the Chicago Board of Education for six years. During this time, she studied at the Lewis Institute and the University of Chicago, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1925 with an emphasis in anatomy and zoology. An instructor at the Evanston Hospital Training School for Nurses in 1925, she matriculated at the medical school in 1926. She graduated with an MD following her internship at the Los Angeles County General Hospital in California.

Dr. Sirmay opened a private practice in Los Angeles following graduation. Her husband died in an automobile accident in 1934, and Dr. Sirmay began working as a public school physician, which provided a steady income and regular hours while her daughter was growing up. Dr. Sirmay then joined a large group practice in Los Angeles as the sole female physician. She died in November 1990.





Edna Mae Ward was born in Cicero, Illinois in 1906 and grew up in Joliet, Illinois. On completing her secondary education, she applied to the medical school in 1926. After an internship at the Illinois Education and Research Hospital in Chicago, she was awarded an MD in August 1931.

Her interest was in mental health. Dr. Ward was employed by three state institutions in Illinois: Elgin State (1933-1943), Herrin Hospital (1947-1962), and Anna State Hospital (beginning in 1963). She operated private practices in Nashville, Illinois (1944-1945) and in Herrin, Illinois (1947-1963). Dr. Ward was married to Charles Longwell, MD, Northwestern University Medical School, 1932. She died in 1993.

Vera Blanche Slagerman, a native of Bathgate, North Dakota, was born in 1907. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1927 and a Bachelor of Medicine in 1928 from the University of North Dakota. She began her medical studies at Northwestern as a third year student in 1929. After completing an internship at Los Angeles County General Hospital in California, she was awarded the MD degree in August 1931.

Dr. Slagerman returned to California after graduation. In 1936 she traveled to Italy, returning to her private practice and position at the LA County General Hospital. She died in April 1994 in West Hollywood and is buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery.



**Missing Dr. Christophel

Related blog entries:

[*A Brief History of Co-Education at the Medical School](#)

Remembering Graduates of the Northwestern University Woman's Medical School

[The Feinberg School Celebrates 150 Years: the New Chicago Campus, 1926-1955](#)

Special thanks to Assistant University Archivist, Janet Olson for additional biographical material.

Future articles will include biographies and images of women at Northwestern's medical school.

Historical items including books, photographs, instruments and equipment are available for study and viewing. Please call (312) 503-8133 or [email](#) for an appointment with the Special Collection

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