On 28 September 1865, after a long struggle to jump the required hurdles, Elizabeth Garrett (later Garrett Anderson) passed the Society of Apothecaries’ licentiate exam, allowing her to join the recently instituted General Medical Council’s register and therefore practise medicine. Although Elizabeth Blackwell, born in Bristol but brought up and educated in the US, had been the first woman to feature in the inaugural register of 1859, it is the Elizabeth that she inspired, Dr Garrett Anderson, who is arguably the best-known medical woman pioneer. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and those women doctors that followed her argued that their presence in all fields of medicine was vital, not least to encourage women patients to feel confident in coming forward to be examined and treated. General practice was their primary opportunity, especially as gaining hospital roles was incredibly difficult without access to the old-boys’ network. They were certainly not received with open arms. An editorial in The Lancet from 1873 argued: ‘Women are neither physically nor morally qualified for many of the onerous, important, and confidential duties of the general practitioner …’. A handbook for the aspiring doctor, The Young Practitioner (1890), confirmed that ‘... the woman is, and ever will be, the angel of the sick room’. Women’s battles to break into medical careers against this domestic carer stereotype, particularly after the introduction of registration in the mid-19th century, is a well-told story.

**ADAPTING TO COVID-19 DISRUPTION**

With this historical context as its backdrop, the project was originally planned as an in-person exhibition to explore the range of roles that women have played in general practice from College pioneers such as first woman Chair and President Dame Annis Gillie (1900–1985) to those just entering the profession today, and from GPs’ wives as essential unpaid team-players in previous decades, to women currently working in key roles such as practice managers and primary care pharmacists. This broad remit has remained throughout, even when it became clear that a physical exhibition was impossible during the pandemic restrictions. Instead, the College created its first online exhibition combining images of its own collections, biographies of women both past and present, audio clips from the oral history collection, and video contributions from then RCGP President Professor Amanda Howe alongside award-winning poet (and GP receptionist) Gemma Barnett. The material was organised around eight themes from careers advice to international perspectives, and is still fully available to explore at www.rcgp.org.uk/women-in-gp.

But the objective was always to put material on display to be enjoyed by the many and varied visitors to the College headquarters. As part of the celebrations of the College’s 70th anniversary in 2022, the exhibition on the ground floor asks the key question, ‘What roles have women played in general practice since the College’s foundation in 1952?’ The items and stories on show are drawn from the College members and collections, alongside loans and contributions from external individuals and organisations. From a witch’s charming stone to GP suffragettes, and a paediatric anaesthetic kit to a pioneering 1940s book on breastfeeding, the exhibition also puts the history of women in general practice in its wider context. The displays complement the existing online exhibition, with allied themes and QR codes throughout signposting visitors to explore the virtual and physical material. Portraits of the College’s five women past presidents are also brought into one public space for the first time, including the latest of Professor Amanda Howe, a photographic portrait by Michael Waller-Bridge.

**WHAT TO EXHIBIT**

Choosing what to exhibit started with the selection of key themes in the College’s history and the wider history of women in medicine. Taking the historical domestic caring role expected from women as its starting point, a 19th-century medicine chest sits alongside a pioneering publication on periods written by College member Dr Katy Gardner in 1979 to consider how traditional
Women at the heart of general practice

Her recent book Beneath the White Coat: Women in Medicine T-shirt, representing the long-running organisation that provided practical support and guidance to so many women doctors. The display also indicates the College’s continued work to promote inclusion and diversity in its membership and the wider profession, through its involvement in London and Manchester Pride, and the Virtual Sunday Book Club reading choices for Black History Month 2021.

GPs are part of a much wider team that works together to deliver primary care. Today, and in the past, women make up most of this team including nurses, practice managers, and receptionists. Exhibiting a 1970s typewriter next to a selection of seminal publications on practice management and medical secretarial work next to a 1980s waiting room sign kindly lent by Warders Medical Centre, Tonbridge, which includes ‘Nurse’ alongside the named GPs, illustrates the introduction of what were known as ‘ancillary staff’ from the 1960s onwards.

GPs have always depended on their families to support their work, but the stereotypical mid-20th-century doctor’s wife embodied the roles of receptionist, practice manager, nurse, and confidante. A 1940s telephone is displayed to illustrate its centrality to GP practice, inspired by the conclusion in The Journal of the College of General Practitioners (as it was known then) in 1962 from a study on the contribution of doctors’ wives to general practice by Dr Agnes Kennie (1909–2009): ‘few wives escape the tentacles of their chief enemy, the telephone’.

If the in-person and physical exhibitions prompt visitors to consider the many and varied roles that women have played in general practice, perhaps including their own, the project will have achieved its primary aim.

Briony Hudson,
Briony is an independent medical museum curator, lecturer, and pharmacy historian.
Email: brionyhudson@hotmail.com
@brionyhudson2

This article was first posted on BJGP Life on 7 Mar 2022; https://bjgp-life.com/womenin-gp
DOI: https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp22X719369

The linked online exhibition is here: https://www.rcgp.org.uk/women-gp-exhibition
You can listen to extracts from the College’s oral history collection by scanning QR codes as you visit the exhibition, or by visiting the RCGP Heritage Audioboom channel: https://audioboom.com/channels/5052138

There are also two self-guided walks, both starting at 30 Euston Square, to trace the steps of remarkable women, in medicine and beyond: https://www.rcgp.org.uk/women-gp-exhibition

Wider Societal Roles
Women GPs have not just battled for equality within their profession, but also often played key roles in wider society. Featured doctors include Dr Alice Ker (1853–1943), a Liverpool GP and suffragette sentenced to 3 months in Holloway prison in 1912 for breaking windows in Harrods, but released because of ill health after 2 months, having been force fed. More recent activism is highlighted in the exhibition through the display of a