Today there are female doctors all over the world, yet if we cast our focus back to the beginning of the 19th century, there was not one registered female medical practitioner. The story of the rise of women within medicine is a remarkable one, with considerable challenges, and those who overcame them. My research followed closely the stories of three such women, pioneering the way for women into modern medicine. These women were Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, and Dr Sophia Jex-Blake. While I have focused my attention on these three women, there is no doubt that countless others have contributed to the cause of women in medicine in various ways. I extend my thanks to these intelligent and courageous women of the past; and in the same breath I offer encouragement and blessings to the women of today and tomorrow who will continue to ensure a strong place for women in the world of medicine. Now I will turn to the stories of these three women…

Elizabeth Blackwell was born in Bristol, England in 1821. Her family emigrated to New York City in 1832. Blackwell's interest in a career in medicine began after a friend remarked after having fallen ill, that if she had been able to receive care from a female doctor she might not have suffered so much. This was the beginning of Blackwell's fight for a medical education, a fight that would eventually see her be the first woman to obtain a medical degree in America. She received her medical degree from Geneva Medical College in upstate New York in January 1849.

Blackwell was also the first woman on the register of the General Medical Council (GMC) in the United Kingdom (UK), albeit through a clause in the Medical Act of 1858 that allowed doctors with foreign medical degrees who had practiced in the UK prior to 1858 to be recognised. It would be many years before another woman was allowed to appear on the GMC register. Blackwell was also a source of inspiration for those who would eventually lead the way for women to pursue medical degrees in Great Britain; most notably, she became a mentor to a young Elizabeth Garrett Anderson.

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, born in 1836 in London, England gained her license to practice medicine from the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries in 1865, making her the first female to do so in Great Britain. By the time Garrett Anderson reached this milestone she was no stranger to rejection. Her bid to become medically qualified saw her apply to several medical schools throughout Great Britain, all of which refused to accept her based on the fact she was a woman. At last she was accepted by the Society of Apothecaries, because a condition of the society's character made it illegal for them to exclude a pupil based on their gender. While Garrett Anderson had earned admittance to the college, she would find obtaining a medical education and clinical experience was another matter entirely. She eventually sat and passed the medical licensing exam, having obtained the vast majority of her education by employing private tutors and professors that were willing to teach a woman, rather than through classes at the medical school. Garrett Anderson and six men sat the medical licensing exam that day; she and only two others passed, with Garrett Anderson achieving the highest mark.

Unfortunately, the door to the path through which Garrett Anderson rightly obtained her medical license was slammed shut behind her, with the Society of Apothecaries amending its regulations to disallow privately educated students from sitting the exam. So, while Garrett Anderson became the first woman to qualify in Great Britain, the path for those that followed remained treacherous for many more years to come. However, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson would go on to have a very successful career in medicine in her own right, opening her own practice in late 1865, followed quickly by St Mary’s, a dispensary for women and children. In 1872 St Mary’s Dispensary became the New Hospital for Women and Children. During 1874, Garrett Anderson, alongside Sophia Jex-Blake, founded the London School of Medicine for Women, of which she was Dean from 1883-1902. Her legacy lives on today in her namesake wing of the University College Hospital in London, England.

Lastly, any story about Elizabeth Garrett Anderson would not be complete without mentioning another of her achievements. In 1908, she was elected mayor of Aldeburgh, making her the first female mayor in England. Elizabeth certainly was a woman of firsts, truly remarkable.

In January of 1877 Sophia Jex-Blake would, at last, be awarded a medical degree, something she had been striving to attain for close to a decade. Sophia Jex-Blake, born in England in 1840, would go on to play a starring role in women’s fight for a place in medicine. She is probably most remembered for her pioneering campaign to obtain admission for herself and several other women to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland to study medicine.

The campaign began with Jex-Blake applying to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1869. The medical faculty actually voted in favour of her entry, on the condition that special arrangements would be made by the university to facilitate separation of her from the male students. However, the university court rejected her application stating it was not willing to make such arrangements “in the interest of one lady”. If the changes could not be made in the interest of only one woman, then would they be made in the interest of several? Jex-Blake advertised in newspapers for other women to join her and so the “Edinburgh Seven” was formed. This was a group of seven women including Jex-Blake who became the first women to be admitted to a university in Great Britain. Unfortunately, this success did not last and in 1873 they would be refused the right to graduate, with the court ruling they should never have been admitted entry to the university in the first place.

While the Edinburgh Seven campaign failed to result in the women being awarded medical degrees, in many other ways it was a bril-
liait success. The plight of women entering medicine had garnered great public attention during the campaign, and meant the women had earned themselves some key supporters. Most of the Edinburgh Seven, including Jex-Blake, went on to complete their studies at other European universities outside of Great Britain. Jex-Blake obtained her medical degree from the University of Berne in January 1877.

Although Jex-Blake and the six other women ultimately did not receive medical degrees from a university in Great Britain, the Edinburgh Campaign was no doubt a catalyst for the Medical Act of 1876. This new Act allowed British medical authorities to license all qualified applicants irrespective of their gender, replacing the Medical Act of 1858 which forbade women with a medical degree being registered. This was an enormous step forward for women in medicine and signaled the beginning of their recognition within a workforce that had for so long been accessible only to men.

The courage and passion that these three women displayed during those pioneering years and in their careers that followed, is something that to this day is worth reading about. There is much that can be gained from knowing even a small amount of history from the path we find ourselves walking. Learning the stories of these pioneering women serves, I think, as a reminder to us that progress towards meaningful change is not always a series of successful steps forward. The greatest progress is often made in the step we take forward after we have taken one back, and the story of women in modern medicine is a testament to this.

About the author
Megan Scanlan is a final-year medical student (Trainee Intern) based at the Dunedin School of Medicine. Her research into this topic began after being an avid attender of the History of Medicine lecture series here in Dunedin. A public lecture is held once each month with someone presenting on a medicine-related topic in history. Having always been interested in history and in particular the Victorian England period, she was inspired to pursue the topic of women in medicine.

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