

**A Vital Force: Women Physicians and Patients in American Homeopathy,
1850-1930**

by

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Abstract

Despite the significant numbers of women who graduated from homeopathic medical colleges in the 19th century, with few exceptions, histories of women in medicine have neglected homeopathy as an important area of medical practice. Considered "irregulars" by contemporary critics, present day historians have largely accepted the rhetoric of difference espoused by both regular and homeopathic physicians, obscuring similarities of orthodox and homeopathic medical knowledge, practice, and professional cultures. In this view, women struggled not only as the "other" as women in a male dominated profession, but also as the "other" medically.

Challenging this assumption, this dissertation reveals the professional, educational, and therapeutic similarities of homeopathic and orthodox medicine, while demonstrating the professional advantages to women who chose homeopathy as a route to a medical career. While sexual separatism characterized the careers of women orthodox physicians throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, women homeopaths integrated homeopathic colleges; faculties and hospital staffs; and were elected officers in homeopathic medical societies. They enjoyed the patronage of educated upper class patients, and were respected members of their communities. Women's inclusion in the homeopathic profession was stimulated by a combination of factors, including the role of females in developing the

homeopathic materia medica; pecuniary interests of homeopathic institutions; local political, social, and professional influences; and the connections between homeopathy and liberal social reform, including women's rights.

Leaders in the both the homeopathic and regular professions acknowledged the important role of women patients in the growth of homeopathy, believing women's enthusiasm rested on homeopathy's gentle therapeutics. While therapeutic alternatives were one part of its appeal, the meaning of homeopathy changed over time, differed among individuals, and was part of a broader critique of American social and cultural norms.

Based on case reports, physicians' records, medical society proceedings, letters, manuscript material on women homeopaths, and records of the American Foundation for Homeopathy, the dissertation reveals the complex intertwining of gender and professionalization as well as the expectations and experiences of patients, bringing to light women's large role in a profession both separate from and part of the main currents of American medicine.