First among women

Pierce Grace

The deplorable fact is that (women) are so often careless mothers, weak wives, poor housekeepers, ignorant nurses and frivolous human beings. If they would perform with strength and wisdom the duties which be immediately around them every sphere of life would soon be open to them.

In 1847 Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to be admitted to medical school

ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

Surprisingly, these rather derogatory remarks were expressed by Elizabeth Blackwell in 1852 in a letter, refusing to speak at a women's rights convention in New York. Elizabeth Blackwell was the world's first woman doctor, graduating from Geneva Medical College, New York, in January 1849. A few women had practised medicine before that date but Elizabeth Blackwell was the first to receive a formal medical training and degree and the first to be registered as a medical practitioner in the United States and subsequently with the General Medical Council in England.

She was born at Counterslip, Bristol, in 1821 into a family that believed in and practised equality of the sexes. Her father was Samuel Blackwell, a well to do congregationalist and sugar refiner. He and his wife, Hannah, had nine children, five girls and four boys. Four maiden aunts also lived with the family and it seems that they were not averse to expressing their opinions on how young ladies should be brought up. The aunts disapproved of the simple clothes worn by their nieces and by their lack of interest in feminine affairs.

When Elizabeth was 11 the family emigrated to New York, where her father prospered. The family became involved in the antislavery movement and Elizabeth subsequently joined several abolitionist societies. Like many young people she was undecided as to what she wanted to do with her life. But she was determined not to devote her time to the usual occupations of her contemporaries—being demure and ladylike, husband hunting, and, worst of all in Elizabeth's eyes, minding children. The sudden death of her father in 1838 brought reality to one of Elizabeth's nightmares: she and her sisters had to open a school to support the family. The school lasted for six miserable years. Also in 1838 the four girls joined the Church of England. (Although her work in later life was admired by the members of Society of Friends, Elizabeth never formally became a Quaker.)

Plea for a woman doctor

In 1845 Elizabeth visited a friend who was dying from a uterine disorder. It was one of those mysterious women's diseases about which, like money, self respecting Victorians did not speak. Her friend confided to Elizabeth that she had not sought medical help until her symptoms were well advanced because she had been embarrassed to mention them to her male doctor. Had there been a woman doctor available she would have sought help sooner. She suggested to Elizabeth that she should study medicine. Initially Elizabeth was horrified at the thought, but after her friend had died the idea began to grow on her. She wrote to several eminent doctors seeking their views on her idea of becoming a doctor. "Good idea," they all replied, "definitely a need for women doctors, but quite impossible." Elizabeth thought otherwise.

While she continued to teach Elizabeth began to study medicine independently. Her attempts to gain

entry to a medical school failed miserably. In Philadelphia she was told that the best thing she could do was to disguise herself as a man and go to Paris. Disguise she did not adopt, but subterfuge she did. Having been rejected by all the famous medical schools, she began to apply to various country medical schools in the United States. In her applications she used the names of the famous institutions she had applied to and gave the reasons why they regrettably were unable to take her. She made it sound as though these famous schools thought it an excellent idea that she should study medicine but that the size and nature of their particular classes prevented them from taking her. This approach eventually worked and, after a unanimous yes vote by her future classmates, she was admitted as a medical student to the Geneva Medical College in New York State in October 1847.

This was only the first rung. She had difficulty finding somewhere to live. The idea of taking an unchaperoned single woman as a lodger was more than most landladies could countenance. When she graduated top of her class in 1849 *Punch* was moved to publish some congratulatory verses to Doctrix Blackwell. Her fame notwithstanding, however, she found that no hospital in the United States would admit her to gain the ward experience so necessary before embarking on her own practice. She went to Paris (undisguised), where she entered La Maternité, a lying in hospital and a school for midwives. Fourteen hours a day gave her lots of practical experience and she planned a future for herself as a gynaecological surgeon.

Dream of surgery shattered

Disaster struck on 4 November 1849. Early in the morning Elizabeth went to the ward to syringe the eyes of a child with purulent ophthalmia. She was tired and as she was gently syringing the infant's eyes some of the water accidentally squirted into her own eyes. She rubbed them and thought no more of it. That evening both eyes were swollen and inflamed and she could not see. She had contracted purulent ophthalmia. She was treated aggressively in the manner of the times. Her eyes were syringed regularly, cautery and leeches were applied, and the membrane which formed over her eyes was carefully removed. After three weeks her eyes opened again. She was completely blind in one eye and partially blind in the other. Her dream of becoming a surgeon was shattered.

Undaunted, Elizabeth turned to medicine and obtained permission from Sir James Paget to study at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London. In 1851 she returned to the United States, where despite her excellent training and impeccable credentials she was refused the post of physician to the women's department of a dispensary in New York. She began to practise on her own in a small way and gave a series of lectures entitled "Laws of Life, with Special Reference to Physical Education of Girls." Several Quakers who came to hear her lecture liked her philosophy and began to support her practice. From then on she was solvent.

Elizabeth Blackwell subsequently opened a hospital which was staffed entirely by women: the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children. Later she founded a medical school, where she held the

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BMJ 1991;303:1582-3

foundation chair in hygiene. At the outbreak of the American Civil War she organised the National Sanitary Aid Institute and chaired a registration committee for the training and deployment of nurses.

Although Elizabeth remained single throughout her life, she adopted a 7 year old orphan.* When Elizabeth thought that her various American enterprises were able to fend for themselves she settled in the south of England in Hastings. In 1875 she became professor of gynaecology at the London School of Medicine for

*Kitty Barry lived with and helped "Auntie" Blackwell throughout her long life. She returned to America in 1920 and died in 1936.

Women and she took an active part in the agitation against the contagious disease acts, a nasty piece of Victorian legislation which permitted the detention and forcible examination of women suspected of having venereal disease.

Elizabeth Blackwell lived on to see many other women follow in her footsteps. By 1889 there were 3000 registered women doctors in the United States, and today thousands of women doctors graduate worldwide each year. Elizabeth continued writing throughout her life and visited America for the last time in 1906. She died in Hastings in 1910 aged 89.

Death of a heart surgeon: reflections on press accounts of the murder of Victor Chang

Deborah Lupton, Simon Chapman

Victor Chang—portrayed as a secular saint

ASSOCIATED PRESS

On 4 July 1991 Australia's most prominent heart surgeon, Dr Victor Chang, was murdered in a bungled extortion attempt by gunmen in a suburban street of Sydney. The murder generated massive news coverage, far in excess of that accorded to any ordinary murder. For days almost all the Australian media ran lengthy lead stories on the killing, on Chang and his work, on those who mourned him, on speculation about his murderers, and on their eventual arrest. Aspects of Chang's work had long attracted wide publicity, giving him great prominence in Australian public life. His murder was thus not just the murder of a man or of any doctor, but the murder of a very public medical figure.

Chief among the themes which dominated Chang's public profile were his work with transplantation and artificial hearts. The identity of some of Chang's patients and their medical problems, recovery, and gratitude to him had been widely publicised. Some, including politicians and media baron Kerry Packer, already had public identities—their status as Chang's patients simply added another layer to their public personae. Such publicity positioned Chang as the surgeon chosen by Australia's richest and most famous. Others, like teenage heart transplant recipient Fiona Coote, became national celebrities as a consequence of being treated by Chang. Background articles that accompanied the news stories of his death and its sequelae concentrated much of this public profile.

Chang's death as news

What was it about the combination of Victor Chang the man, his background, his work, his patients, and the circumstances of his murder that the Australian media instantly identified as a major story? This paper examines in detail the press reportage of Chang's murder. The manifest content of the reportage was "the murder of a heart surgeon," but, as we will show, the rhetorical devices employed to depict and editorialise Chang's death were redolent with symbolic imagery and subtextual meanings. Examination of these devices reveals much about wider ideologies concerning the social importance of doctors (particularly surgeons), medical technology (especially transplantation and artificial organs), the body as machine, and the heart as an elite and highly symbolic organ. The huge media interest in Chang's murder presents an opportunity to examine the processes by which such ideologies are reproduced in popular culture and an opportunity to reflect on the interests which they both serve and, as a corollary, deny.

Events are considered newsworthy if they concern elite persons or nations, are dramatic, can be personalised, have negative consequences, and are part of an existing newsworthy theme.¹ Chang's murder fulfilled all these characteristics. As a heart surgeon he was a member of an elite occupation that enjoys one of the highest social standings in Australian society. His death was highly dramatic, involving elements of tragedy (the sudden and violent death of a kind and brilliant man capable of saving other's lives), of a mystery (who were his killers, what was their motive?), and suspense (when were the murderers going to be apprehended?). Because Chang had a wife and children, as well as many colleagues and patients who liked and respected him, his death could also be portrayed in personal terms. His death had negative consequences because it robbed Australia of an experienced, successful, and innovative heart surgeon who could save lives; his work developing an artificial heart was cut short. Finally, the story could be slotted into several wider newsworthy themes: the heroism of heart surgery, the tragedy of violent crime directed against innocent individuals, the sudden death of a loving husband and father, and the success story of the rise to prominence, wealth, and social standing of an Asian immigrant who arrived in Australia as a youth with a poor command of English and achieved rags to riches success in a strongly egalitarian society.

All of these themes can bear more detailed analysis. We have chosen to explore the first, the heroic nature of heart surgery, in greater detail, discussing the manner in which the popular press "made sense" of Chang's murder and placed it on the cultural map of meaning as an obvious news story. Little is random in the process whereby particular events are deemed by journalistic cultures to be newsworthy and to traverse the pathway from arcane, behind the scenes scientific or medical event to publicised media release and on to selection, headlining, and publishing or broadcast by the media. A vast literature about media analysis contends that the way in which phenomena are both selected and represented in the mass media facilitates the reproduction of certain ideologies that serve various interest groups. We have adopted this approach to understand why Chang's death received the massive media attention it did.

Doctors as heroes in the media

In Australia doctors enjoy the highest social status, although media reports of overservicing, doctors'

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BMJ 1991;303:1583-6