



MONTHLY MEMO:



Women's History Month

Happy Women's History Month!

Women's History Month is a time to honor the women whose brilliance, courage, and perseverance reshaped the world — especially in healthcare. Throughout history, women have pushed past systemic barriers, limited access to education, and widespread discrimination. Their contributions span pharmacology, neuroscience, cardiology, and more.

This month, we celebrate the women whose discoveries saved lives, expanded access to care, and changed the future of medicine. Their work reminds us that progress in healthcare depends not only on innovation, but also on equity, determination, and the willingness to challenge the status quo.

Gertrude B. Elion (1918 – 1999)



Gertrude B. Elion was a Nobel Prize winning pharmacologist who developed antiviral medication. Growing up in the Great Depression era, Elion overcame financial and gender-based setbacks to get her bachelor degree in chemistry. She worked hard in her research of pharmaceuticals. She developed anti-viral medicine, which was

thought to be impossible at the time. Her medication alleviated people with illnesses such as herpes encephalitis, Epstein-Barr virus, and shingles. For this, she earned a Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1988. Elion's research still helps save lives today.

Patricia Goldman-Rakic (1937 – 2003)

Patricia Goldman-Rakic was a neuroscientist, professor, and author who established foundational research in the prefrontal cortex, working memory, dopamine function, and more. She worked at the National Institute of Health early in her career. Her work has led to the molecular understanding of different mental disorder, especially schizophrenia. Her research has shaped the study of neurobiology. Her groundbreaking studies make her a pioneer in areas of neuroscience.



Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910)

The first woman in America to receive a medical degree, Elizabeth Blackwell championed the participation of women in the medical profession and ultimately opened her own medical college for women. When Elizabeth was in her mid-20s, her close friend died after a long illness.

Before she died, the friend told Elizabeth that she would

have suffered less if she had been able to see a woman doctor. She studied medicine before applying to Geneva Medical College. The college viewed her application as absurd but allowed the all-male student body to vote on whether she should be accepted. The students voted “yes” as a joke, and Elizabeth became a medical student. She persisted through mistreatment by all of whom wanted to discourage her. In 1849, she became the first woman to graduate from a U.S. medical college. After graduation, she focused on the care of women and children. While treating an infant, she contracted a disease that left her blind in one eye. This ended her ambition to become a surgeon, so in 1853, she opened a clinic, New York Dispensary for Women and Children. This clinic was the first place that offered poor women and children the chance to see a woman physician.



Helen B. Taussig (1898 – 1986)

Cardiologist and founder of pediatric cardiology, Taussig received her education at many distinguished universities, but studied cardiac research and pediatrics through John Hopkins School of Medicine. Known as the founder of pediatric cardiology for her work on “blue baby” (Anoxemia) syndrome. After her work in 1944, in which she and colleagues created the operation responsible for correcting the congenital heart defect that causes the syndrome, many lives have been prolonged. She had used fluoroscopy (x-ray) to establish the cause of the issue and created the operation that would soon be published as the Blalock–Taussig operation and used worldwide.

In 1947, Taussig published *Congenital Malformations of the Heart*. In 1954, she received the prestigious Lasker Award, and 5 years later would be awarded full professorship at John Hopkins University. This made her one of the first women in history to hold that rank. In 1965, she would be elected the president of the American Heart Association, and received the medal of freedom from President Lyndon Johnson.



Florence Nightingale (1820 – 1910)

Florence Nightingale wanted to be a nurse from a very young age, refusing marriage and urging her parents to send her to study nursing. During the Crimean war, Nightingale was in charge of nursing British and allied soldiers. Her personal care and nighttime rounds established her the moniker: “The Lady with the Lamp.” She wrote over 150 books, pamphlets, and reports on health-related issues of her time. She put immense effort into formalizing the education around nursing. In 1860, she opened the first science-backed nursing school, the Nightingale School of Nursing. On top of educational anatomy, she is also credited with making hospitals cleaner and safer. International Nurses Day now commemorates her birth and celebrates nurses in healthcare.





Clara Barton (1821-1912)

After an early career in teaching, Clara moved to Washington, D.C. and worked at the U.S. Patent Office. She was one of the first women to work for the federal government. During civil war, she bravely provided nursing care and supplies to

soldiers: activities that ultimately defined her life and earned her the nickname, Angel of the Battlefield. With permission from resident Lincoln, she opened the Office of Missing Soldiers, helping reconnect more than 20,000 soldiers with their families. During a trip to Switzerland in 1869, Clara

learned about the Red Cross movement, a European humanitarian effort to provide neutral aid to those injured in combat. Inspired by that cause, Clara volunteered with the International Committee of the Red Cross, providing civilian relief during the Franco-Prussian War. This experience, along with her work during the Civil War, inspired Clara to bring the Red Cross movement to America. To this day Clara's legacy lives on, reflected in the spirit of Red Cross volunteers and employees. Because of one woman, Clara Barton, the American Red Cross brings help and hope across the nation and around the world.



Dr. Virginia Apgar (1909 - 1974)

Dr. Apgar was an obstetrical anesthesiologist and medical researcher who created the Apgar Score which led to a reduction of infant mortality rates. The Apgar Score is an assessment of a baby's health within its first minutes of leaving the womb. Before 1952 there wasn't any sort of method to assess birth defects, effects of labor, delivery, and maternal anesthesia, but thanks to the Apgar Score, this led to the formation of neonatology, which is the care of newborn infants, and the creation of neonatal intensive care units.



Marie Curie (1867- 1934)

Marie Curie was a physicist, chemist, and the first female Nobel Peace Prize Winner, and made many contributions in the science field despite the discrimination against her gender. Marie Curie discovered that the utilization and isolation of radium and polonium could lead to radiation being used in treatment for cancer. During World War I, Madame Curie created mobile vehicles equipped with X-Ray machines to help doctors within the units to help locate bullets and treat other wounds, ultimately saving many lives. Her work transformed the understanding of radioactivity and laid the foundation for future advancements in cancer treatment and medical imaging.



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SOURCES

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Patricia Goldman-Rakic

[The Neurobiology of Thought: The Groundbreaking Discoveries of Patricia Goldman-Rakic 1937–2003 – PMC](#)

Florence Nightingale

[Florence Nightingale | National Women's History Museum](#)

Helen B. Taussig

[Taussig, Helen Brooke](#)

[Dr. Helen Taussig's work saved 'blue babies' and made her the mother of pediatric cardiology | American Heart Association](#)

Marie Curie

[Women's History Month: Madame Curie | Blog | NorthShore Health Centers](#)

Virginia Apgar

[The History Behind the Apgar Score | NewYork-Presbyterian](#)

Clara Barton

[About Clara Barton | Red Cross Founder | American Red Cross](#)

Elizabeth Blackwell

[Life Story: Elizabeth Blackwell – Women & the American Story](#)