

Agnodice Biography

Agnodice

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Biography

Agnodice was the first Greek woman licensed to practice medicine in ancient Athens. According to Hyginus, a Latin author of the A.D. first century, Agnodice was a Greek sage who lived five hundred years earlier in the republic of Athens, then a patriarchal society, where the learning and practice of medicine was an exclusive privilege of men. Determined to study medicine, Agnodice cut her hair, wore male clothing, and so disguised became a student under the famous anatomist Herophilos (ca. 335 B.C.).

Agnodice dedicated herself to the study of gynecological diseases, which would to become the focus of her clinical practice as a graduated physician. Always disguised as a man, she treated women, and when needed, revealed to her patients her real gender in order to be accepted by those who felt embarrassed in allowing a man to treat their gynecological or labor-related complications. Her knowledge and ability in the field of gynecology granted her an ever-growing female clientele that started refusing other male doctors. Agnodice's success among female patients aroused envy and suspicion from other local physicians, who accused Agnodice (whom they thought to be a man) of seducing the female clientele of the city. Patients were also accused of feigning illness to secure visits from Agnodice. Taken to court, Agnodice defended herself by lifting her tunic and revealing her true gender as a woman, being thus acquitted from such charges. However, she was now accused of illegal practice of medicine, since the laws forbid women to both learn medicine and work as a physician. The wives of Athens came to the court in her support. Further considerations led the judges to lift such legal restrictions against women, therefore recognizing Agnodice's right to practice medicine and paving the way for other female citizens to be accepted as healers. Agnodice's legend was again heralded in the nineteenth century, as women in the Western world sought entrance into traditionally male institutions of medical education.