Our First Female Dentist in Canada: Dr. Josephine Wells

By Catherine Morana

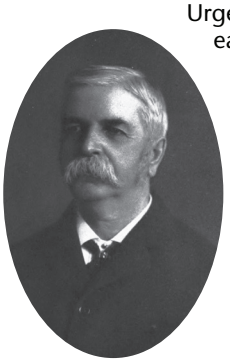
In Canada's early days, dentistry was solely a male profession. In 1875, the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario founded Canada's first dental school, but there are no female graduates on record until Caroline Louise Josephine Wells in 1893.

Josephine Wells, as she called herself, was the first woman licensed to practise dentistry in Canada. She may never have intended to apply for a dental licence, but circumstances propelled her out of necessity.

Records indicate that Josephine was born Caroline Louise Josephine Irwin, the eldest of five children, in 1855, in Aurora. In March 1876, Josephine married John Wells in Aurora. In 1882, John graduated from the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario, the gold medallist in his class. He relocated his family and dental practice to Toronto in 1889, where he maintained a solo dental practice at 259 Spadina Ave., but at some point appears to have become ill. Josephine, eventually the mother of three children, realized she needed to assume some responsibility for the family's business, so she decided to study dentistry. In 1891, Josephine was accepted into the dental class of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario.[1]

Dr. Josephine Wells

Josephine embraced her role as a dentist, sending her children to live with relatives in order to properly study. Josephine was assisted with her studies by Dr. Luke Teskey, MD, LDS, a professor and one of the founders of the dental school, who likely taught her husband. In 1893, Josephine was granted an "LDS," a licentiate in dental surgery. While able to practise dentistry, she could not call herself "Dr."



Dr. Daniel Clark

Urged on by her friends, Josephine would earn that title and pursue a doctorate in dental surgery. She graduated from the University of Toronto with a doctor of dental surgery degree (DDS) in 1899. Dr. Josephine Wells gave birth to her last child the following year. Historical records indicate that by 1907, she operated a thriving dental practice in Toronto.

What sets Dr. Wells apart from her dental colleagues is her pioneering role in providing hospital dentistry, specifically treating patients in provincial asylums. She worked with Dr. Daniel Clark, MD,[2] superintendent at the Asylum for the Insane, Toronto (1875–1905). How Dr. Wells connected with Dr. Clark is unclear, though it is likely through university.

Dr. Daniel Clark was a noted physician in Victorian Canada. In the 1870s, he was an early advocate for the non-restraint of asylum patients[3] and was known for his humanistic approach to the treatment of mental patients.

In 1898, Dr. Clark introduced a non-coercive program of dental care for the patients at the Toronto asylum.[4] His belief was that "proper dental care would lead to better chewing habits and an improved diet, which would have a positive physiological impact on a person's physical and mental health."[5]

Dr. Josephine Wells was providing dentistry to hospital patients as early as 1901.[6] In 1911, a report about dentistry in provincial asylums painted a grave picture for the patients: no dental inspections were conducted, and non-paying patients in provincial asylums relied solely on physicians for extractions.[7] Dr. Wells is singled out as providing dental care to patients in Toronto and Mimico hospitals, as well as at the Mercer Reformatory for women. While funds were set aside for an appointee in Kingston, a call for an appointment was made and for a more "uniform and systematic policy"[8] of treatment for this population. It would take another 20 years for the province to adopt a standing policy of a resident dentist assigned to the dental care of patients in mental hospitals, in 1931.[9] Dr. Wells would devote many years to servicing the needs of this vulnerable population.

The Asylum for the Insane, Toronto, shown here in the early 20th century.
(Special Collections Toronto Public Library)

When she gave up her dental practice, she was appointed by the government and placed in charge of dental services in Ontario hospitals in Toronto, Mimico, Hamilton and Orillia. She would retire in 1928, when she was 72 years old.[10]

Dr. Josephine Wells passed away in 1939, at the age of 83. No lecture or paper is evident from Dr. Wells that offers insight into the care of her patients and how she came to her role in hospital dentistry. Perhaps her powerful body of work speaks for itself. yoh

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In 2016, 37 per cent of the licensed dentists in the Ontario were women. And of the 502 dentists applying for a licence that year, 50 per cent were women.[11] Dr. Josephine Wells would be proud.

Rarer than Hens' Teeth— Women Dentists in the 19th Century

It appears that female dentists in Ontario didn't face the formal opposition that women entering the profession of law or medicine did.[12] And by the time Josephine Wells received a licence to practise dentistry in 1893, the concept of female dentists had already gained ground and acceptance in the United States. In 1892, the Women's Dental Association was formed in Philadelphia. Lucy J. Hobbs was the first female American to graduate with a doctorate in dentistry from a dental college in 1866[13]; however, she was originally rejected as an applicant in 1861 and practised only after taking private study.

Hobbs was breaking ground, gaining acceptance that women could be more than a homemaker and teacher. The delicate problem of teaching anatomy to women in the presence of men surfaced with both Hobbs and Henriette Hirschfeld, who was from Germany and graduated from the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery in 1869. Hirschfeld would end up learning anatomy at the Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia.[14] But specific insights are offered with Annie D. Ramborger, the second female American to graduate from a dental college in 1874. Never were the objections to women entering a dental college set out so boldly — but this time from dental students in the form of a petition.

Dr. Annie Ramborger

Unlike her colleagues, Ramborger (nicknamed "Fannie") had neither connections to dentistry before applying to dental college, nor family members who practised dentistry.

Penniless at 15, Ramborger had dreamed of becoming a dentist. When she came into a legacy from her uncle, Ramborger applied for admission to the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery. Relatives were said to be aghast at her decision. The college took six months to mull over Ramborger's application before finally admitting her. One year into her studies, her fellow classmates began a petition to expel Ramborger. There were several complaints: they could no longer smoke when she was around (gentlemen didn't smoke in the presence of ladies), and when discussions occurred during anatomical lectures, her "being a woman" prevented them from receiving "clear and full explanations of the human organism."[15] Full disclosure of the raw details was being whitewashed for her delicate ears. Perhaps their most telling complaint was that she was taking up operatory time. The implication was clear: the operatory would be better served if used by male students. *The Globe and Mail* reported on this saga, citing all these complaints as "strong objections surely." Ramborger countered that "science has no sex" and took her case to court, as the college had already accepted her money. After a lengthy battle, she won the right to return to her studies. Ramborger graduated in 1874 and practised dentistry successfully for 16 years, after which she did what all her male classmates expected she would do: give up her practice and marry. Few remarked on the real value that her choice to practise dentistry afforded her: the self-sufficiency and freedom to choose whatever role she wanted. Ramborger's lasting comments were: "I have enjoyed a delightful remuneration for my labour and been free from the unpleasant and oftentimes humiliating restraint to which many occupations pursued by women are subjected."

I guess science never expected Fannie.