

## Giovanna Sait, first female surgical student in Florence, Italy

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The history of women in medicine and surgery is rich with untold stories of their perseverance in overcoming obstacles to gain access to medical education and practice. One such story, which we are pleased to share with the readers of this journal, is that of Giovanna Sait, the first known female surgical student in Florence, Italy, in the 18th century.

About 12 years ago, the discovery of a female surgeon in Florence in 1788 was communicated to the scientific community.<sup>1</sup>

The result was significant for the earliness with which a woman had requested permission to practice after a period of hospital training. The earliness concerned not only the Italian context but also Europe at the time.

Her name was Maria Petrocini Ferretti: the members of the examining board initially refused her request to take the exam to become a surgeon, but Maria insisted and succeeded.

This was the reason for the denial: «There were no recorded cases of female surgeons in Florence». However, the text added: «with the exception of a young woman who came from Malta».

According to this statement, before Maria, another woman had studied surgery in Florence, but her identity remained unknown, so much so that her very existence was questioned.

Some historians reported this information, but the student's name remained unknown.<sup>2</sup>

All we knew was that on 11 October 1762 the Knights of the Great Hospital of Malta had sent a young woman to Florence to specialize with the surgeon Angiolo Nannoni (1715-1790) and then return to practice in Malta, where the hospital could also count on female staff. However, the name of the young woman was still unknown.

Recently, from a systematic search for Regency documents concerning the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, a file emerged, regarding "Young people admitted to the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova to study medicine, surgery, and pharmacy", divided into unnumbered records and arranged in descending order from 1763 to 1739.

The papers regarding the young woman had been misfiled and were accidentally found in a file relating to the years 1743-1744, and not 1762.<sup>3</sup>

The name of the young woman was Giovanna Sait: she was housed in the convent of the nuns who served in the hospital, and she was allowed to attend only the

women's wards, without contact with her male colleagues. She remained in Florence from 1762 to 1766.

It was difficult to reconstruct her path, because the documents were perhaps deliberately misplaced by those who consulted them.

We cannot know who was responsible for this concealment and when, but we can guess the reason: the Florentine medical college did not want to create a precedent by admitting a woman as a surgeon.

Giovanna Sait had been sent to study in Florence, given the great fame of the School of Surgery of Santa Maria Nuova, before returning to Malta.

In the city of Valletta there was, in fact, a women's hospital, where women worked as orderlies and midwives: from 1765, they were able to carry out low, medium and high complexity surgical operations.<sup>4</sup>

In Florence, the presence of a female surgeon would have been considered an unusual situation, which had to be managed with great care and the story of Giovanna Sait had remained buried in the archive papers.

This discovery pushes back the presence of a female surgery student in Florence to 1762. At a time when the presence of women in medicine and surgery is increasing, it is worth remembering the effort they have made to achieve this goal.<sup>5</sup>

**Key words.** Female surgeon, gender, history of surgery.

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