Matilde Montoya

Matilde Montoya was the first woman to practise medicine in Mexico, earning a doctorate in 1887 and specialising in surgery and obstetrics. Montoya's legacy inspired the establishment of better education opportunities for women in Mexico.

Born in Mexico City in 1859, Montoya was encouraged to study from a young age by her mother, Soledad Lafragua. She completed her formal education by the age of 12 and earned a degree to become a midwife by 16, spending the next two years practising her profession in the city of Puebla, central Mexico.

While enjoying a successful career as a midwife, Montoya received abuse from doctors who orchestrated a hate campaign against her in local newspapers. Despite the resistance she encountered, she applied to the National School of Medicine in Mexico City. Although she was rejected on her first application, she was finally accepted in 1882 by the institution's principal, Francisco Ortega.

Her acceptance was met with hostility from the university, with some surgeons and other students attempting to kick her out on the grounds that only male students were allowed. These objections led to her removal from the school, and she was forbidden from continuing her studies to become a surgeon.

Taking matters into her own hands, Montoya wrote a letter to the president of Mexico, Porfirio Díaz, requesting that she be reinstated at the university and allowed to take her examinations. Díaz, an advocate for middle- and upper-class women's rights to education, instructed authorities at the university to allow her to continue her studies.

Montoya graduated from medical school in 1887, becoming the first female physician in Mexico. Her graduation ceremony was personally attended by Díaz and his wife to congratulate her on her success. Throughout her medical career, even after graduation, she received abuse from other medical professionals who criticised her credentials. Despite this, Montoya had a long, fruitful career in gynaecology, obstetrics and paediatrics.

Montoya continued to advocate for equal access to education for women, co-founding the Mexican Association of Female Doctors in 1925. She forged a path for hundreds of Mexican women that followed in her footsteps to pursue a career in medicine, despite the field being dominated by men at the time. Now, women represent nearly 70 per cent of the global healthcare workforce.
Her achievements contributed to the feminist movement in Mexico in the early 1900s, which continued after her death on 26 January 1939, at the age of 79.
On 14 March 2019, she was honored with a Google Doodle, on what would have been her 160th birthday.

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