

Fatma Belkis Derman (1906-1958): The first female community pharmacist in Turkey

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Abstract

After graduating from the Istanbul University School of Pharmacy in 1930, Fatma Belkis Derman (1906-1958) left her mark on the history of pharmacy as the first female pharmacist in Turkey to set up a pharmacy, operate a laboratory, and receive a license for a proprietary medicine in her own name. Despite various obstacles and even disdain amongst the locals of her time, she made women pharmacists visible and respectable in Turkey, paving the way for Turkish women to pursue pharmaceutical careers.

Introduction

The involvement of women in the pharmaceutical profession has a long but chequered history. From Saint Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century Benedictine abbess and herbalist polymath, to Spanish pharmacist Dr Carmen Peña, the first female president of the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP) in 2014, we find pharmacy greatly indebted to women.^{1,2} Some of the pioneers are the first women to graduate from schools of pharmacy, such as Mary Corinna Putman (1842-1906) in the USA (1863) and Andréine Doumergue (1844-1877) in France (1874); as well as the first female presidents of pharmaceutical societies, such as Isabella Clarke-Keer (1843-1926) from the Association of Women Pharmacists (UK; 1905) and Jean Irvine (1877-1962) from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (1947-1948).^{3,4,5}

However, limited historical information remains in the literature addressing women's achievements in, or contributions to, pharmacy, particularly in non-Western countries. In order to contribute to bridging this gap, the current paper seeks to present the first comprehensive biography in English of Fatma Belkis Derman, the first female community pharmacist in Turkey, on the sixtieth anniversary of her death. The study was undertaken using primary reference sources obtained from her descendants, together with several other archival records and biographical sources.

The admission of Turkish women to health professions

Aside from the fields of midwifery and nursing, Turkish women's admission to the study of medicine began

during the First World War (1914-1918), presumably due to lack of medical professionals, many of whom were serving at the Front.⁶ Although the Şûra-yı Devlet (the Ottoman Council of State) had made a decision in 1898 that disallowed women from studying medicine, a small number of Turkish women went abroad to become physicians. An early example is Safiye Ali Hanım⁷ (Krekeler; 1894-1952), who went to Germany in 1916 to study medicine at Würzburg University and returned to Turkey in 1922.⁸

The situation remained unchanged for nearly two decades until 1917, when the Sıhhiye Meclis-i Umûmisi (the General Board of Health) amended the previous ban, allowing women to study medicine in Turkey. Nonetheless, it was after enduring struggles that female students were given permission to register at the Tıp Fakültesi (the Faculty of Medicine) in 1921, which was put into effect a year later.⁹ Similar attempts were also made in the field of dentistry; Ayşe Şâdiye Hanım (Güvendiren; 1904-??) and Hatice Azrâ Hanım (1897-??) became the first dentists to graduate in 1926. Additionally, the first female Turkish physicians graduated two years later.¹⁰

With regard to pharmacy, the situation was somewhat similar. During the Ottoman Empire, although formal pharmacy education was offered for the first time at the Mekteb-i Tibbiye-i Adliye-i Şâhâne (the Imperial School of Medicine) in Istanbul in 1839, female students were allowed to enrol at the Eczacı Mektebi (the School of Pharmacy) only after 1922.¹¹ It was, however, only in September 1924 that Ayşe Saâdet Hanım became the first female student to enrol in the School of Pharmacy, although she quit after six weeks. Other students followed her in enrolling to the same school, but either failed classes because the courses were discontinued or transferred their registrations to other schools of the same university, mostly the Faculty of Medicine and the School of Dentistry. Among these was Fatma Belkis Hanım (Derman at marriage), who was in fact the fifteenth female student to register at the School of Pharmacy, but who would be one of the first to graduate.¹²

This flourishing of women's rights was in fact mostly due to the reforms implemented by the Young Republic, founded in 1923 under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), that encouraged girls to receive education and to be actively involved in the community, giving special importance to women's rights (i.e. adoption of the Swiss Civil Code in 1926, voting rights in local elections in 1930, full universal suffrage in 1934, and the election of female deputies to the Turkish Parliament in 1935).¹³



Figure 1. Fatma Belkis Derman when she was a student at the School of Pharmacy in Istanbul, late 1920s. (Source: Courtesy of the Derman Family)

Biography of Fatma Belkis Derman

Fatma Belkis Derman was born in İzmit, Turkey, in 1906 to parents who had immigrated from Belgrade and Vidin.¹⁴ Although she had initially aspired to become a teacher during her years at Erenköy Kız Lisesi, a respected high school for girls in Istanbul, and even had attended the related teaching courses, she changed her mind to pursue a career in pharmacy and registered to the Istanbul University School of Pharmacy (under the Faculty of Medicine) on 17 September 1927, with student number 294 (Figure 1).¹⁵

Completing her three-year studies there, and an internship at the Sırrı Enver Pharmacy in the Fatih district of Istanbul, she graduated in June 1930 (Figure 2). Thus she qualified as one of the first female pharmacists in the country, together with Ayşe Semiha Hanım (Erçin; 1907-??) and Fatma Bedriye Hanım (Siren; 1910-2007), two sisters, who would later become assistants at the departments of organic chemistry and biochemistry of the School of Pharmacy, respectively (Figure 3).^{16, 17}



Figure 2. The pharmacy diploma of Fatma Belkis Derman, given by the Istanbul University Faculty of Medicine on 31 July 1930. (Source: Courtesy of the Istanbul University Faculty of Pharmacy)



Figure 3. Fatma Belkis Derman (first left) together with her two female classmates, Ayşe Semiha Erçin (second left) and Fatma Bedriye Siren (third left), at the School of Pharmacy in Istanbul, ca. 1930. (Source: Courtesy of the Derman Family)

Because of Law No. 694 that mandated limiting the number of pharmacies in accordance with the population, allowing one pharmacy in a district per 10,000 inhabitants, Fatma Belkis Hanım went to Adapazarı, a city where her family resided. She worked there for a short period of time as a commercial partner of pharmacist Ömer Bey's community pharmacy, before setting up her own Belkis Eczâhânesi (the Belkis Pharmacy) in Düzcce in 1931. Thus she became the first female community pharmacist in Turkey.^{18, 19}

In an interview she gave to Yeni Gün newspaper in 1931, Fatma Belkis Hanım stated that she was rather occupied with her pharmacy work. Although being much welcomed by the sole doctor of the district and local women there, some male villagers had doubts

about her filling their prescriptions. She was even told of men standing outside of her pharmacy, waiting for the pharmacist instead of his presumed daughter. Fatma Belkis Hanım further stated that thanks to her strong commitment and keen observation skills, she was successfully able to integrate with local culture and become very familiar with the medical slang of the local patients, who called diseases and medications by different and mostly incomprehensible names.²⁰

Interestingly, even several decades before the growth of patient-centred care in modern pharmacy practice, with remarkable foresight Fatma Belkis Hanım stated in the same interview that

besides medications, I often give a lot of advice to my patients. I like my profession much more for being a confidant to most of them. Day by day, I better understand that comforting patients and their relatives, giving them hope, encouragement and empowerment, is of much more importance than solely giving medications.²¹

Fatma Belkis Hanım married Hasan Derman (1904-1971), a 1927 pharmacy graduate and later president of the Türkiye Eczacılar Cemiyeti (the Turkish Pharmaceutical Society), and she moved to Istanbul in 1932.²² The following year, she took over the Ahmet Süreyya Pharmacy at no. 22 Ördekli bakkal Street in the Kumkapı district where she would operate until February 1939. She then ran the İstanbul Eczanesi (the Istanbul Pharmacy) at no. 33 Tramvay Street in the Bahçekapı district (jointly with pharmacist Kemal Atabey), after the owner of this pharmacy, pharmacist Agop Minasyan, died in August 1941 (Figure 4).²³



Figure 4. Stationary of Fatma Belkis Derman's İstanbul Eczanesi (the Istanbul Pharmacy) with its label including a pharmaceutical logo together with caduceus and the inscription of Belkis Derman's name, ca. 1941. (Source: Mert Sandalcı Collection)

The proprietary medicines Derman produced in her pharmacy were Kinol, Vinokinyum and Comprimé Sulfaseptin, of which only the last one was patented in her name.^{24,25} Although she additionally became manager of the Istanbul Pharmaceutical Laboratory on 16

February 1944, she did not adapt well to this job and soon quit. Instead, she operated her ongoing İstanbul Pharmacy alone from 1947 until her final years. Suffering from chronic rheumatism and hypertension for many years, she died from heart disease on 26 July 1958.²⁶ Her pharmacy was then operated by her husband for three more years, until it was sold in 1961 to Lemar Başkur-Kazuk (1918-2012), another pioneer female pharmacist.²⁷

Fatma Belkis Derman was known by many of her colleagues as a candid, affectionate, vivid, cheerful and stylish person with high human and traditional values as well as an enthusiastic, meticulous, hard-working pharmacist and an ideal mother.^{28,29} She was for many years socially active with charities and local foundations, such as the Foundation of Women with Higher Education, the Foundation of the Graduates of the Erenköy High School for Girls, and the Soroptimist International, a worldwide volunteer service organization for business and professional women who work in particular to improve the lives of women and girls.³⁰

In the obituary written after her death, Hasan Derman underlined the special place of her pharmacy in Fatma Belkis Derman's life with the following words:

For Belkis, her pharmacy was always more than just a purpose and target; it was the greatest joy, a unique ambition and desire of her life until her last breath.³¹

Fatma Belkis Derman was laid to rest in the Zincirlikuyu Cemetery in Istanbul. She was survived by her only son, Mehmet Uğur Derman (1939-1994), who was a professor of oncology at the Cerrahpaşa Faculty of Medicine in Istanbul at the time he and his wife were killed in a road traffic accident.³²

Derman's historical importance

Fatma Belkis Derman is a monumental figure in the history of Turkish pharmacy, paving the way for Turkish women to pursue pharmaceutical careers. Being a woman of strength and courage, she became the first female pharmacist in Turkey to set up a community pharmacy, operate a laboratory, receive a license for pharmaceutical products, and become a commercial partner of a drug warehouse, as well as a member of a pharmaceutical society. Despite various obstacles and even disdain among the locals of her time, she made women pharmacists visible and respectable in Turkey.³³

Moreover, she served as a role model for later women pharmacists to rise in her country, together with many Middle Eastern countries. This should possibly include Najah al-Saati (1915-2016), who became the first female pharmacist in Syria, and presumably the

Table 1. *The first female pharmacists in different fields of Turkish pharmacy (1924–2015)*³⁵⁻⁴¹

Year	Achievement as the first	Name of female pharmacist	Graduation place	Year
1924	pharmacy student	Ayşe Saadet Hanım (?–?)	not graduated	-
1930	pharmacy graduate and community pharmacist	Fatma Belkis Derman (1906–1958)	Istanbul Univ.	1930
1930	pharmacy graduate and teaching assistant	Fatma Bedriye Siren (1910–2007)	Istanbul Univ.	1930
1930	pharmacy graduate and teaching assistant	Ayşe Semiha Erçin (1907–?)	Istanbul Univ.	1930
1935	pharmacy graduate with the first rank	Semahat Hanım (?–?)	Istanbul Univ.	1935
1942	holder of doctorate degree in pharmacy	Hayriye Amâl (1912–2005)	Istanbul Univ.	1936
1942	director of a drug warehouse	Leman Kazuk Başkur (1918–2012)	Istanbul Univ.	1940
1943	owner of a pharmaceutical laboratory	Leman Kazuk Başkur (1918–2012)	Istanbul Univ.	1940
1944	associate professor	Hayriye Amâl (1912–2005)	Istanbul Univ.	1936
1950	full professor	Hayriye Amâl (1912–2005)	Istanbul Univ.	1936
1957	deputy member	Emine Piraye Levent (1915–1992)	Istanbul Univ.	1936
1959	director of pharmaceutical factory	Güzin Tamaç-Poffet (1926)	Univ. of Bern	1953
1969	dean of a Faculty of Pharmacy	Hayriye Amâl (1912–2005)	Istanbul Univ.	1936
1980	president of a pharmacy chamber	Nermin Usal (1929–2015)	AITIA EYO*	1975
1988	vice rector	Nuriye Aslı Özer (1942)	Ankara Univ.	1965
1991	minister of state	Güler İleri (1948)	AITIA EYO*	1974
1992	member of Académie nationale de pharmacie**	Afife Mat (1953)	Istanbul Univ.	1976
1999	recipient of the TÜBİTAK*** service award	Asuman Baytop (1920–2015)	Istanbul Univ.	1943
2015	president of the EUFEPS****	Erem Bilensoy (1971)	Hacettepe Univ.	1992

* Ankara İktisadi ve Ticari İlimler Akademisi Eczacılık Yüksek Okulu (The Ankara Academy of Economics and Commercial Sciences School of Pharmacy), Ankara. ** The French National Academy of Pharmacy, Paris. *** The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey, Ankara. **** The European Federation for Pharmaceutical Sciences, Stockholm.

whole Arabic world, after graduating from the Damascus Faculty of Medicine in 1949.³⁴

Fatma Belkis Derman was also followed by many of her colleagues as the first females in different fields of pharmacy in Turkey, spanning from academia to the drug industry (Table 1).³⁵⁻⁴¹ Among them, Hayriye Amâl (1912-2005) is of great significance as the first female pharmacist to receive a PhD in pharmacy (1942), becoming a full professor (1950) and serving as dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy (1969-1970). Following in Fatma Belkis Derman's footsteps, the number of female pharmacists had reached 20,045 in Turkey in 2017 –

constituting 56.4% of the 35,537 pharmacists in the country – indicating a slight but continuous increase in recent years.⁴²

Conclusion

Fatma Belkis Derman deserves to be remembered with great admiration and respect for achieving a milestone in the history of Turkish pharmacy, and as a devoted woman of many firsts in her relatively short life. She will continue to serve as an inspiration for girls, not only in Turkey but also in other countries around the world, where they are deprived of the opportunity of an

education – a fundamental human right that should never be relinquished.

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Disclosure statement

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