



E-Newsletter | October 2013

Women Physicians

The average life expectancy in 1900 was 45 years of age. By 2000, that number had risen to 78. A significant factor in that increase in average life expectancy was a decrease in infant mortality. Two physicians whose efforts were key are profiled in this month's e-newsletter: Dr. Helen Brooke Taussig and Dr. Virginia Apgar.



Helen Brooke Taussig

When Helen Brooke Taussig applied to the School of Public Health at Harvard University, the Dean told her she would be able to take courses but not be eligible to earn a degree. Undeterred, she went elsewhere - where she was more welcome - and received her M.D. from the Johns Hopkins Medical School. She is known as the founder of pediatric cardiology. She devoted her work to helping young children with debilitating heart conditions, most notably, the "blue-baby" syndrome, in which infants did not receive enough oxygen in their blood. Children born with this congenital heart defect, in which the pulmonary artery narrowed or closed often did not live past their teenage years, if they survived infancy.



Dr. Virginia Apgar

Taussig worked with Dr. Alfred Blalock to develop a bypass operation today called the Blalock-Taussig shunt. This operation opened an artery to the heart that allowed oxygen to pass through. The text that Taussig wrote became the standard textbook in the field. Later, she also worked to prevent the approval of the drug Thalidomide which had resulted in severe deformities of babies born in Europe. Among her many honors, in 1964, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. Dr. Taussig has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Almost every reader of this e-newsletter who was born in a hospital after 1952 was 'scored' at one minute and five minutes after birth. This assessment, called the Apgar score, has a scale of 0-10 and is used to determine if a baby needs medical assistance. The lower the score, the more assistance that the baby needs. Dr. Virginia Apgar developed that score which is used worldwide and has saved the lives of countless newborn babies. The score uses her name and assigns a 0, 1, or 2 to each category:

A - Appearance

P - Pulse

G - Grimace

A - Activity

R - Respiration

After being one of the few women admitted to the Columbia University College of Physicians, Apgar wanted to become a surgeon. However, she was told that at this time in our country's history (the early 1930's), she would starve - because no one would want a woman surgeon! So, Apgar shifted her focus to anesthesiology. She became the Director of Anesthesiology, the first woman to head any department at the University. Another first for Dr. Apgar was when she became the first woman full professor at the University.

After leaving Columbia, she served as an executive with the March of Dimes Foundation, continuing her work to identify and prevent birth defects. In 1973, she became the first woman to receive the Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement in Medicine from the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. Dr. Apgar has been featured on a U.S. postage stamp and, like Dr. Taussig, has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

We salute these women whose efforts contributed to our health and well-being today.

Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America
Charlotte S. Waisman and Jill S. Tietjen

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