Dr. Virginia Apgar: An inspiration to us all

Did you know that every baby born in a hospital anywhere in the world is first seen through the eyes of Dr. Virginia Apgar? She was the pioneering physician who, back in 1953, invented a method of scoring each baby’s condition at birth. But she also accomplished much more than that. Since August 7 marks the 35th anniversary of her death, let’s pay tribute to this remarkable physician by highlighting some of her accomplishments. Keep in mind, Virginia Apgar overcame many obstacles while pursuing her goal of becoming a physician and helping others. Her biggest obstacles? Financial hardship and a male-dominated profession prejudiced against women. Her biggest assets? Determination and a life-long sense of optimism. She was always in a hurry, talked fast, and never looked back. She inspired me, and, hopefully, she will inspire you too.

1909: Virginia Apgar was born on June 7, 1909 to Helen and Charles Apgar in Westfield, New Jersey.

1925: After graduating from Westfield High, she entered Mount Holyoke College, majoring in zoology. She played on 11 intramural teams and seven varsity teams, wrote for the newspaper, acted, played violin in the orchestra, opened the college library every morning, took care of the anatomy lab, sold Puerto Rican linens, and earned extra money during Christmas vacations catching cats for the zoology department.

1929: After graduating from Mount Holyoke, she entered Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, one month before the stock market crash.

1933: Graduating fourth in her class and nearly $4,000 in debt, she received her M.D. degree from Columbia. She was awarded a highly-prized, two-year internship in surgery at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

1935: After completing her surgical internship, she decided not to practice surgery. Switching careers, she began training at Columbia to become an anesthesiologist.

1938: After completing her training in Madison, Wisconsin, and at Bellevue Hospital in New York, she returned to Columbia. Only 29, she was appointed head of the division of
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anesthesiology, under the department of surgery, making her the first female division head in the medical school’s history.

1939 -1948: Under Dr. Apgar’s leadership, medical students were taught anesthesiology for the first time; a residency training program in anesthesiology was established; and nurse anesthetists were replaced by physician anesthesiologists.

1949: The division of anesthesiology at Columbia was split off from the department of surgery and became a separate department under Dr. E.M. Papper from Bellevue. (In other words, Dr. Apgar was passed over for department chairperson in favor of Dr. Papper.) However, she was promoted to full professor, making her the first female physician full professor in the medical school’s history. Not one to sit around and sulk at being passed over, Dr. Apgar turned her attention to obstetrical anesthesia. She hit on the idea for a new way to evaluate newborns at birth. While carrying a full clinical load, she attended hundreds of deliveries gathering data to test her idea.

1953: She published her newborn scoring system, a method for evaluating newborns at one minute after birth. Not yet known as the Apgar Score, her scoring system caught on in hospitals all over this country. Now delivery room personnel had to pay attention to each baby in order to assign their score. This meant better care for babies. And Dr. Apgar and other researchers could also study the effects of drugs used during labor on the baby at birth by comparing the scores of babies who had been exposed to a drug to the scores of those babies who had not been exposed to the drug. All in all, her scoring system turned out to be the most important advance in the history of newborn care.

1956: She met Carleen Hutchins, a patient admitted for surgery and noted designer of stringed musical instruments. With Carleen’s help, Dr. Apgar started making her own stringed instruments, including several violins and violas. They also became lifelong friends.

1957: Under Dr. Apgar’s leadership, Columbia Presbyterian became the Mecca for training in obstetrical anesthesia. Physicians came from all over the world to train with her and learn her techniques. You might say, Dr. Apgar gave birth to obstetrical anesthesia as a specialty unto itself.

1959: On her 50th birthday, she received a master’s degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. But instead of returning to Columbia, as originally planned, she joined the March of Dimes as director of the newly-formed Birth Defects Section. For the
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next 15 years, until her death in 1974, she traveled the world helping transform the March of Dimes from an organization devoted to conquering polio to one committed to preventing and treating birth defects.

1962: In a letter to the Journal of the American Medical Association, Drs. Butterfield and Covey identified the five variables of her newborn scoring system (color, heart rate, reflex irritability, muscle tone and respiratory effort) with the five letters of her last name (Appearance, Pulse, Grimace, Activity, and Respiration). As a result, her newborn scoring system became known as the APGAR Score, now calculated at one and five minutes after birth.


1974: Virginia Apgar died of cancer on August 7, 1974 at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. A memorial service, held one month later, was attended by thousands of friends and admirers.

1975: The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) established the Virginia Apgar Award to be given annually to an individual whose career had a continuing influence on the well-being of newborn infants.

1984: Dr. Joseph Butterfield sparked the Apgar stamp campaign to honor Dr. Apgar with a U.S. postage stamp. More than a dozen organizations joined in the effort, including the AAP and the March of Dimes.

1994: The U.S. Postal Service issued and dedicated the 20-cent Virginia Apgar stamp on October 24, 1994 at the annual meeting of the AAP in Dallas, Texas. Using the four stringed instruments crafted by Dr. Apgar and her good friend, Carleen Hutchins, the Apgar String Quartet played her favorite music at the ceremony. The instruments were later purchased by friends and colleagues and donated to the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons where they are currently maintained and displayed.

Yes, 35 years have passed since Virginia Apgar’s death. Yet her influence is as strong as ever. Each day, every baby born in a hospital anywhere in the world is first seen through the eyes of Virginia Apgar.

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