

"FRANKLY, HOW DID SHE DO IT?"



VIRGINIA APGAR (1909-1974)

Virginia Apgar, physician and anesthesiologist, teacher and author, and crusader for preventing and treating birth defects; decided to pursue a career in medicine while still in high school.¹ After graduating from Mount Holyoke College in 1929, she enrolled in Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons where she was one of only nine women in a class of ninety. She received her M.D. degree in 1933 and completed a surgical internship at Presbyterian Hospital (later Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center) in 1935. Because of widespread prejudice against women doctors and poor prospects for employment during the economic depression of the 1930s, Apgar decided to enter the emerging field of anesthesiology. In 1938 accepted an appointment as Clinical Director of the Division of Anesthesiology at Presbyterian Hospital, becoming the first woman to direct a division at the institution.

In 1949, Apgar relinquished her administrative duties but remained at Presbyterian Hospital as a full professor and began devoting more time to the study of anesthesia used in childbirth. After years of clinical observation of newborns, she developed a scoring system to measure an infant's heart rate, respiration, muscle tone, reflexes, and color as a way of determining which babies would need immediate medical attention. Presented in 1952, her system--known as the Apgar Score--became the standard means of evaluating the health of newborns.

Apgar completed a Masters of Public Health degree at Johns Hopkins University in 1959 and left the Presbyterian Hospital to become Chief of the Division of Congenital Malformations at the National Foundation-March of Dimes. She educated audiences throughout the world about the need for research into the prevention and treatment of birth defects and raised funds to support that work. She also served in other administrative positions at the Foundation and taught at Cornell University Medical College and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. Apgar published over sixty scientific articles and many shorter essays for newspapers and magazines. In addition, she collaborated with Joan Beck on a book entitled *Is My Baby All Right?* (1972).

Apgar received many honors and awards during her lifetime, including honorary doctorates from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania (1964) and Mount Holyoke College (1965), the Elizabeth Blackwell Award from the American Medical Women's Association (1966), and the Distinguished Service Award from the American Society of Anesthesiologists (1966). She died of liver disease on August 7, 1974 in New York City. Posthumous honors for her include a commemorative U.S. postage stamp issued in 1994 and induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1995.

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“FRANKLY, HOW DID SHE DO IT?”, Virginia Apgar (1909-1974) and the “CHANGING THE FACE OF MEDICINE: CELEBRATING AMERICA’S WOMEN PHYSICIANS” exhibit are on display on Level 6, Williston Memorial Library, Mount Holyoke College, September 1-30.

For more information <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/changingthefaceofmedicine/> and <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/library/changingthefaceofmedicine/>