

in memoriam

Dr. Virginia Apgar '29

Dr. Virginia Apgar, honorary degree recipient in 1965 and alumnae trustee from 1966 to 1971, died unexpectedly in New York on August 7.

Virginia Apgar '29 was one of the world's most distinguished, most respected and most beloved women in medicine. A person of great moral courage, she brought to her profession a warm heart, boundless energy generously expended for others and an inquisitive mind eager to embrace new ideas.

Virginia grew up in a lively household. She once said that she came from a family that never sat down. Her father was of a scientific bent and a born musician. With him and her gifted brother she shared deep interest in music. Adept in the use of tools, her father taught Virginia skills which were to serve in good stead when she started to make her own stringed instruments much later in life. The family had impromptu concerts and Virginia and her brother Lawrence C. Apgar, professor of music at Earlham College, often played duets.

In college Virginia carried a full schedule. In addition to her studies, she was active in athletics, played in the college orchestra, took part in dramatics and worked to help pay her way. In 1929, in a letter to President Woolley recommending Virginia as a candidate for a fellowship, I wrote: "Miss Apgar has been an excellent student in both histology and medical zoology. It is seldom that one finds a student so thoroughly immersed in her subject and with such a wide knowledge of it. . . . I am, therefore, very glad to recommend Miss Apgar to you and I believe that any encouragement which is given to her in the way of a fellowship will be thoroughly appreciated and well used." It was my privilege not only to know Virginia

as a student but also as a friend. Except for reunions when she stayed with her class, my home was hers in South Hadley. She was a delight to have.

When Virginia graduated from the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1933, she went into surgery, but after two years she felt that in the United States this field had no place for a woman unless she had an independent income. Virginia was in debt. She turned to the developing field of anaesthesiology. Up to this time the open-drop ether procedure administered by nurses was the usual technique. But new methods were being devised and Virginia demonstrated one of her outstanding characteristics: she went to the University of Wisconsin Medical School, which had the best anaesthesiology department in this country to learn the new techniques. She was the only woman in the class and she became the 50th American doctor to be a board-certified anaesthesiologist. Thereafter, she built up a foremost anaesthesiology department at P. and S. and was the first woman to be made a full professor in the medical school.

Since much of her work was in the delivery room, she organized in 1949 and was head of obstetrical anaesthesiology. She estimated that she had helped to deliver about 17,000 babies. Concerned about the health of the newly born baby, she gathered data from 1949 to 1952 to establish criteria for prognoses at the earliest possible moment. This study was believed to be the first extensive program in neonatal research ever undertaken in the United States. The data were finally reduced to five signs, now known all over the world as the Apgar score, to be read within 60 seconds after a baby's head and feet were visible. Someone made APGAR the acronym

for the test: A, appearance (color); p, pulse; g, grimace (reflect irritability); a, activity (muscle tone); r, respiration. Each sign is worth 0, 1 or 2, and 10 is the best score.

One of her colleagues at this time described Virginia as "a marvellously selfless human being" and told the following story: "When my son then one year old needed a hernia operation, Virginia learned that he hated elevators. You know what she did? She took him in her arms up nine flights of stairs to the operating room. I love that girl."

Virginia believed increasingly that perinatal deaths were a public health problem so in 1958-1959, during her sabbatical leave, she decided to go to The Johns Hopkins University to learn the methods used in this field. She there earned the degree of master of public health. At the end of that year, officials of the National Foundation-March of Dimes persuaded her to join them as the head of the division on congenital malformations with supervision of grants for genetic research. At the time of her death she was senior vice president in charge of medical affairs. When she was 63, Virginia returned to The Johns Hopkins University during 1972-1973 to further her knowledge of medical genetics by studying biostatistics, epidemiology, human biology, cell biology and computer sciences.

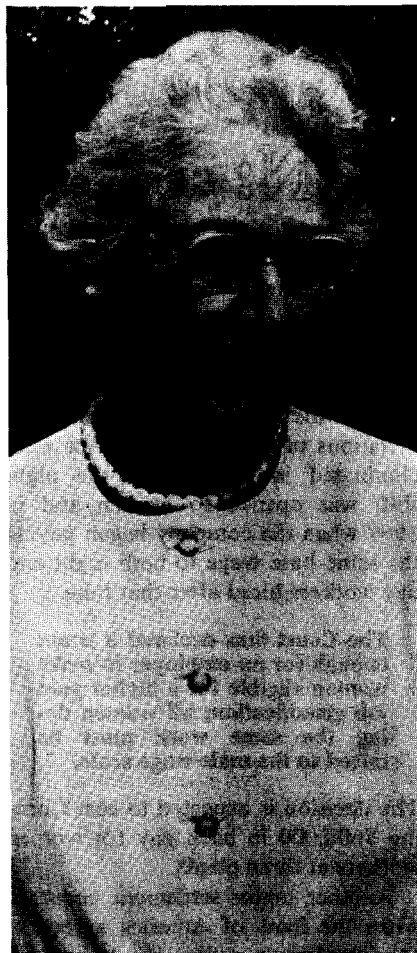
Virginia never forgot that she was a doctor and was not afraid to involve herself when she passed scenes of accidents. She carried in her handbag an airway tube, sharp pocket knife and Band-Aids. The knife was for emergency tracheotomies. She once said that she had used the airway tube in sixteen automobile accidents to resuscitate victims, and is quoted to have remarked, "Nobody, but nobody is going to stop breathing on me."

The awareness of academic institutions and of the public of Virginia's important contributions to the fields of maternal and infant health is shown by the number of awards with which she was honored, seven in 1973. These recognitions must have meant much to her as she stated recently that she considered her mission in life was to help mothers deliver healthy babies and to prevent birth defects.

Virginia believed deeply in the purposes and the activities of the National Foundation-March of Dimes and she worked effectively to promote its interests. So was she also a loyal and dedicated alumna of Mount Holyoke College. She was a delightful and spicy speaker at alumnae club meetings and wherever she was and whenever she could, she paid tribute to her alma mater. From 1966 to 1971 Virginia was an alumna trustee and served on the selection committee for the president. She was always interested in women doctors and while she was on campus she met with students and encouraged them to enter the profession. She also started a file of Mount Holyoke graduates from 1968-1972 in medical schools to learn what she could of our students. She was unable to complete this. However, she did keep in touch with some of them. She was always eager to return to the College after her trusteeship to talk to students including those in classes of Dr. Carol Craig (director of the Pattie J. Groves Medical Center), on topics dealing with birth defects, genetic counseling and other aspects of her work. Her young friends, I may say, thought she hung the moon.

With Joan Beck, Virginia co-authored the book *Is My Baby All Right?*, published by Trident Press in 1972. The two collaborators worked together for several years, Virginia often making trips to Chicago for conferences. During her career Virginia wrote 70 articles and was responsible for three films, but the book with Mrs. Beck was the crowning achievement. This is an important book, well written and beautifully illustrated by Mr. Beck.

Devoted and deeply involved as she was in her work, Virginia was a person of varied interests in which she was not dilettante. She was not one to



waste time, and when she came to South Hadley she often brought along March of Dimes correspondence, magazines to clip, or if it were the New Year, a batch of "Ginnygrams" to which she often added personal notes. These "Ginnygrams" not only kept hundreds of friends in touch with her but frequently kept mutual friends in touch with each other. Virginia was an avid stamp collector, a hobby which brought her relaxation after her busy days. Her volumes contained over 50,000 stamps and at Christmas time each year she shared some of these with young friends all over the world whom she had met in her travels. On one of her visits to my home her first request was for a bowl of water to soak off from their backing stamps she had brought with her. She had in years gone by fished in the St. Lawrence River some 25 times, and she was looking forward in July, 1974 to return to that fishing ground with a new rod.

Gardening was another source of relaxation for her. Not only did she keep her apartment full of growing things but she reveled in planting and caring for both a flower and vegetable garden. She traveled with her camera and sent back to her friends pictures of her visits with them. As she was sometimes the only passenger in a small private plane, she decided to learn to fly so that in a crisis she could bring a plane down. She, therefore, took lessons in flying all over the country whenever she was near enough an airfield where she could practice. Another diversion for her was the playing of golf.

Music, a part of her younger days, was her everlasting satisfaction and joy. In addition to listening and playing herself, Virginia learned to make her own stringed instruments. She made a viola, violin, cello and had nearly completed a mezzo violin. A happy preoperative conversation with a patient, Mrs. Carleen Hutchins, brought to her this wonderfully gratifying occupation. An event at the beginning of this avocation is the basis of one of her favorite stories. Mrs. Hutchins had spied a well worn but beautiful curly maple shelf in a telephone booth in the hospital. As there was no legitimate way to get it, the two surreptitiously replaced the wanted curly maple shelf with a replica made of another wood. This maple shelf became the back of Virginia's first viola.

She was an active member of the Amateur Chamber Music Players, an international organization, and she met with different groups whenever she could at home and in her travels. She was also a member and officer of the Catgut Acoustical Society, worldwide also, which was devoted to the research, development and improvement of stringed instruments.

In her high school year book, the list of her many activities ended with this question, "Frankly, how did she do it?" Virginia had a tremendous spirit. Early in life she had captured the excitement of living and she never lost it. To us who are bereft, she has left a wonderful heritage.

CHRISTIANNA SMITH '15
Professor Emeritus of Zoology