

3rd Historic teaser: The Amazing Story of MWIA continues (1949-1958)

Over the years, medical women have proven their mettle and have left a mark on the pages of history. They have battled stereotypes, racism, and sexism within the field of medicine. We remember them today with pride and find ways to keep them alive in our memories.

The occasion of MWIA's Centennial is an opportunity to give pause and consider where women physicians have come from, honour the rich history of MWIA and look at our story together. Let's first focus on the major events of this Fourth decade, 1949-1958 and then a few of the medical milestones.

This period in history includes the Korean War (1950-53), colour TV arrives to American homes in 1953 and in 1952 Princess Elizabeth becomes Queen Elizabeth. Other highlights of the decade include the discovery of DNA in 1953 and Sir E.P. Hilary and T. Noorgay became the first men to reach the summit of Mount Everest. The soviet satellite Sputnik was launched in 1957. Probably the most notable event during the years of 1949 to 1958 was in 1954 that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) granted MWIA consultative status as a non-governmental agency.

In 1949, the Blackwell Medal was initiated in honour of Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, and is awarded annually by the American Medical Women's Association to a woman physician with outstanding performance in the field of medicine.

The world of cancer research and treatment changed in 1951 because of a woman named Henrietta Lacks who was not a medic but led to one of the most valuable contributions in medicine. The tumour cells taken from her, whom she had never consented to giving, led to medical research that won two Nobel prizes.



There are many remarkable achievements of medical women during the 4th decade. In 1952 **Virginia Apgar**, an anesthesiologist in New York, introduced the APGAR Score in clinical practice to evaluate the health status of newborns that is still the stand of care worldwide today. Apgar (Photo to the left¹, (Wiki Commons)), was honoured with a commemorative US postage stamp in 1994 and inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1995.

Rita Levi-Montalcini (Photo to the right²), an Italian neurophysiologist, isolated the Nerve Growth Factor in 1952 and was the co-winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in medicine. In 2001 she became an Italian senator for life for her contributions to science and died in 2012 at 103, never marrying or having children.



A few years later, the work of **Dr. Isabel Morgan** (Photo to the left³) and her team created history. Her work was crucial in the development of the Jonas Salk vaccine for polio in 1955. Those efforts have brought the world to a point where the elimination of polio sometimes seems possible.

Medical women have fought to push their boundaries further and further in areas other than medicine. In 1952, **Edith Irby Jones** became the first African-American student to enroll in what was at the time a segregated medical school. Today,

¹ This photo is from the New York World-Telegram and Sun collection at the Library of Congress. According to the library, there are no known copyright restrictions on the use of this work.

² Rita Levi-Montalcini, circa 1975; Courtesy of Becker Medical Library, Washington University School of Medicine

³ Courtesy: Post-Polio Health International; <http://www.polioplace.org/people/isabel-merrick-morgan-phd>

African-American students form the largest number of applicants to medical schools in the US with the number of women graduates being more than men.

We, as medical women, stand before the world today as the borne fruit of the efforts of all these brave and courageous women who challenged the ideas of their time.

During this decade three MWIA Congresses were held:



1950: *Congress in Philadelphia, U.S.:* Anemia in Women-Pathology and Hygiene of Housework

1954: *Congress in Gardone, Italy:* The Menopause

1958: *Congress in London, UK:* The Adolescent. The Photo to the right shows Esther Pohl Lovejoy receiving a plaque at the MWIA meeting, London, 1958.⁴

MWIA presidents were: Dr. Charlotte Ruys, Netherlands (1947-1950), Dr. Ada Chree-Reid, U.S.A. (1950-1954), Dr. Jolanda Tosoni-Dalai, Italy (1954-1958) and Dr. Janet Aitken, U.K, being installed in 1958.

MWIA Honorary Members (4th Decade) were: *E. Pohl Lovejoy:* Cofounder of MWIA, *L Martindate:* specialist in the early treatment of cervical cancer, *H. Acosta-Sison:* first Filipino woman that became a medical doctor and Professor obstetrics and gynecology, *E. Trapp:* President of the National Cancer Institute of Canada, *L. Gianferrari:* founder of the Prematrimonial Genetic Counselling Bureau and *A.C. Ruys:* expert in hygiene and public health.

This 4th decade was a period of growth for MWIA from its 16 founding nations⁵ in 1919 to an **incredible 33 National Associations in 1958**⁶.

Stay tuned for the story of the next decade in MWIA's important history!

Sources

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⁴ Medical Women's International Association meeting, London, 1958," Courtesy of OHSU Historical Collections & Archives.

⁵ Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom United States of America, Hungary, Mexico, Spain

⁶ 1959: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, UK, Norway, Netherlands, India, Italy, New Zealand, USA, Sweden, Philippines 1949, Switzerland 1949, Israel 1950, Cuba 1950, Germany 1952, South Africa 1954, Hong Kong 1954, Iran 1954, Taiwan 1954, Thailand 1954, Lebanon 1956, Greece 1956, Portugal 1956, Turkey 1956, Argentina 1958, Peru 1958, Japan 1958, Vietnam 1958, South Korea 1958