

Harriet Lawrence (1883-1974)

By Morgen Young

Harriet Jane Lawrence was one of the earliest female pathologists in the United States and the first known woman pathologist in Oregon. She was born in Kingsbury, Maine, on September 13, 1883. At the age of fifteen, she began teaching, walking several miles to the schoolhouse to earn three dollars a week. With money she saved, she put herself through college and medical school. In 1912, she graduated from the Boston University School of Medicine, one of six women in her class. She then worked for a few months as a resident pathologist in Boston before moving to Oregon that same year.

In Portland, Lawrence worked with Ralph Matson, a tuberculosis specialist. In 1913, a group of doctors invited her to open her own laboratory in the Selling Building, where she worked for half a century, referring to herself as a “microbe hunter.”

In 1918, hospitals across Oregon were filled with flu-infected patients as the nation experienced a pandemic of Spanish influenza. The Oregon State Board of Health brought a culture of the virus from a Bremerton, Washington, navy yard to Lawrence’s laboratory. With the culture, Lawrence developed a serum therapy that was prepared from and directed at secondary bacterial invaders and was sent to Oregon doctors across the state to treat those who were infected. No one at the time understood that the 1918 influenza was caused by a virus, which was not identified until the early 1930s and not cultured until 1935. Nonetheless, President Woodrow Wilson recognized the significance of her work on the serum when he honored Lawrence for her contributions to medicine. As a pathologist, she worked closely with the Board of Medical Examiners in Portland, and her laboratory developed a reputation for its reliability among investigators.

In 1927, Lawrence became a fellow with the American Society of Clinical Pathologists. The society had been formed five years earlier in St. Louis during the American Medical Association annual meeting. Its purpose was to further clinical pathology and to maintain the field on equal ground with other medical specialties.

Lawrence was a member of the Medical Club of Portland, along with several other noted women physicians in the city, including Jessie McGavin, Amelia Zeigler, and Mae Cardwell; she served on the club’s executive committee. She also was active with the local chapter of the Philanthropic Educational Organization (P.E.O.) Sisterhood, an international women’s organization devoted to providing educational opportunities to female students. She was elected president of Chapter X in 1934.

Throughout her career, Lawrence encouraged women to enter the field of medicine and advocated for equal education regardless of gender, particularly through her work with the P.E.O. Sisterhood. Lawrence aided Oregon doctor Alan L. Hart, who transitioned from female to male in 1917. On a written recommendation from Lawrence, Hart obtained a position as a staff physician at the Albuquerque Sanatorium.

As a pathologist in Portland, Lawrence worked closely with the Board of Medical Examiners. Her laboratory developed a reputation for its reliability among investigators for the board. She received the Distinguished Alumni Award from the General Alumni Association of Boston University in 1963 in recognition of her professional excellence, her contributions to medicine, and the example she set for women in the field.

Harriet Lawrence worked as a surgical and clinical pathologist for more than fifty years in Portland before retiring in 1967. She died in Portland on February 28, 1974, at the age of ninety.

Sources

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