

## Arab American Heritage Month: Rudy Sabbagha, MD

### Rudy Sabbagha, MD, 1931-2020

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Rudolph Elias Sabbagha was born on October 29, 1931, in the city of Jaffa, in what was then the British territory of Mandatory Palestine and is now Israel, to Lebanese parents. His father, Elias, was a surgeon and by the age of seven Sabbagha knew he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and become a doctor. He attended the American University of Beirut and earned his MD from the school in 1958. That same year he married Asma Sahyouni, PhD, a clinical psychologist, with whom he would have two children.

Sabbagha first worked as a senior physician for the Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company, which oversaw an oil pipeline that ran across the Arabian peninsula. During his time with the company, he began to specialize in obstetrics and gynecology. In 1965 he came to the United States and began a residency at Magee-Womens Hospital at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. His wife Asma also worked at Magee, in its social services department. Furthering this, Sabbagha held a postgraduate fellowship at the University of Glasgow with Ian Donald, who had pioneered the diagnostic use of ultrasound in obstetrics in the 1950s. Sabbagha took this relatively new technology back to Magee-Womens Hospital, where he became the head of sonar diagnosis testing. Under his leadership, Magee became one of the first hospitals in the country to have an ultrasound system with an image display. While there, he also developed a rating scale to detect abnormal patterns of fetal development and to better predict delivery dates.



Sabbagha using an ultrasound machine on a patient at Magee-Womens Hospital. From the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 30, 1974.



Portrait of Sabbagha, from *Northwestern Memorial Hospital Today*, Spring 1982.

In 1975, Sabbagha was hired by Northwestern University Medical School, where he would work for the next 20 years. As a professor at Northwestern, physician at Prentice Women's Hospital, and the medical director of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Ultrasound Center, he quickly became a leader in the field of ultrasound in high-risk obstetrics. He published a book on the subject in 1979 and that same year served on a Task Force on Predictors of Fetal Maturation for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. In the 1980s, he extended his expertise to fetal surgery, in which surgical procedures are performed on fetuses still in the womb, guided by ultrasound. In 1982, he was part of a team at Prentice that drained fluid from the head of a fetus with hydrocephalus, in a procedure that had been previously performed only six times. In recognition of his work, he was made a Fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology and of the American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine, as well as a Diplomate of the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

Sabbagha became an emeritus professor at Northwestern in 1994 but continued to practice medicine. In 1989, Sabbagha was the second ever recipient of the Career Achievement Award from the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics. Rudy Sabbagha died in Chicago on November 15, 2020, at age 89. In the words of his senior sonographer, Sharon DalCompo, "Your deep caring for patients cannot be compared with any other doctor on this earth. You had that special connection to each and every woman you cared for. Dr. Sabbagha, no one will ever take your place."

### Selected References

Goff, Barbara. "In Memoriam: Rudy E. Sabbagha M.D." *The American Gynecological and Obstetrical Society 2021 Program Book*. September 2021.

"[Marquis Who's Who Honors Rudy E. Sabbagha, MD, with Inclusion in Who's Who in the World.](#)" November 6, 2020.