Augusta Webster, MD, 1903-1993

By Emma Florio, Special Collections Library Assistant

Augusta Webster was born on August 31, 1903, in St. Louis. As a child her family moved to the town of Jacksonville, 90 miles north of St. Louis in west central Illinois. Her father George Webster was a physician with a general practice in the Jacksonville area. She would often accompany her father on house calls and in his office. Later in life, she credited this and two women physicians in her town for inspiring her to enter medicine, despite her father's skepticism; while not discouraging, he did not encourage her either, knowing the difficulties women faced working as physicians in the early 20th century.

Webster began her long association with Northwestern University as an undergraduate. She received her BS from the school in 1926. She entered Northwestern’s medical school in 1927, only one year after the school began admitting women. Under a quota system intended to keep the number of women in the medical school low, she was one of just four women in her class. She earned her Bachelor of Medicine in 1931 before completing an internship at Passavant Hospital—she was one of the first women to secure an appointment there—to earn her MD in 1932.

Although she had hoped to become a surgeon, Webster turned to gynecology due to a lack of opportunities for women in that field. This was a more acceptable choice for women at the time and did have a surgical component. She completed a residency in gynecology at Passavant and another in obstetrics at Cook County Hospital and then went into private practice, following the example of her father. After a few years, though, she was hired as a clinical assistant in obstetrics and gynecology at Northwestern University Medical School, taking the first step of the next fifty years of her career.

Webster steadily rose through the ranks at Northwestern, becoming an instructor in 1941, a department associate in 1943, assistant professor in 1951, and associate professor in 1953. She followed a parallel track at Cook County Hospital, becoming a resident obstetrician in 1934, an associate in obstetrics in 1936, and an attending physician 1946. During this time, she helped to establish a family planning clinic at Cook County, as well as a cancer detection center at Women and Children’s Hospital.

Another promotion came in 1953, when she was unanimously elected the Chair of the Department of Obstetrics at Cook County Hospital, making her the first woman in charge of a department at any major teaching hospital in the country. Reflecting on this distinction and her role as a pioneer for women physicians she said, “I wasn’t a great crusader, particularly. I felt that if we did the job and did it well, that would automatically be helpful so far as other women were concerned.” This pragmatism went hand in hand with a levelheadedness that was remembered by former resident, Henry Evenhouse, MD, who said, “she always impressed me as a person in control of the situation and she was able to impart to her residents the importance of not getting rattled in trying situations.”

Webster remained Chair of Obstetrics at Cook County for 24 years and retired completely in 1986 at age 83. She died in Chicago on March 20, 1993. Her legacy continues at Northwestern through the Augusta Webster, MD, Office of Medical Education, as well as the Augusta Webster Faculty Fellowship in Medical Education which had been established in 1991 to honor her reputation as a teacher at both Northwestern and Cook County Hospital. As Robert Buer, MD, a former resident, said, “her most important contribution is the way she taught residents to care for patients regardless of their social status or income level. She has been an impossible act to follow.”

Selected References
“Dr. Augusta Webster: If I had a daughter, I would never push her into medicine.” Chicago Tribune, Oct. 26, 1986.
