

### A Woman of Many Firsts: Augusta Webster, MD

#### 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 in 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's medical school class of 1931 portrait, Galter Library Special Collections.



Webster with her portrait, unveiled in the library in 1984, from *Ward Rounds*, Winter 1984-85.

The 1950s and '60s were the peak of the baby boom in the US, and the obstetricians at Cook County were regularly delivering an average of 50 babies per day, totaling over 19,000 every year. With such a high-profile place in the medical community, Webster garnered recognition and many awards throughout her career. In the 1940s she became a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, and she was a founding fellow of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in 1951. In 1954 she was named Woman of the Year by the American Medical Women's Association (AMWA), and two years later she was chosen by AMWA to be part of a nine-woman delegation that visited the Soviet Union to study medical education and practices there. In 1960 she also became a full Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Northwestern University Medical School, making her the first female Professor at the school.

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 Bouer, 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.

"Dr. Webster's friends unveil the legend and the lady." *Ward Rounds* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1984-85): 30-31.

"Ob-gyn pioneer Webster dies." *Ward Rounds* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 39.

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