

## Women's History Month: Anna Hamann, MD

### Anna Hamann, MD, 1894-1969

By Emma Florio, Archives & Research Specialist

Anna Hamann was born in Hamburg, Germany, in July 1894. Her father, Carl Frederick Hamann taught physics at the University of Hamburg and was a member of Germany's Socialist party, both of which would prove consequential in Anna's life. After studying architecture for a year, she chose to pursue a career in medicine instead. She graduated from the University of Munich in 1921 and received a doctorate from the University in 1924, with the thesis *Development of Biological Foundations of Radium Therapy*. While at the university, she took a course in radiology with physicist Wilhelm Röntgen, who had become famous decades earlier for discovering X-rays. He was known to dislike having medical students—let alone female medical students—in his classes and failed her for being late to class one day, which might have cost her her degree. He eventually relented and let her pass after learning her father was also a physics professor.

Hamann did post-graduate work at many of Europe's leading institutions, including the Institut du Radium in Paris (now known as the Curie Institute) and at Stockholm's Radiumhemmet, the first oncological clinic in Sweden. She also did radiological work with Hermann Holthusen, a pioneer of radiation oncology, at the University of Hamburg. After her studies, in 1924 she started a private radiology practice in the German town of Kronach. Five years later, she joined the staff of St. George's Hospital in Hamburg, where she did research with radium and helped develop the Hamburg technique for treating cervical and uterine cancer with radium.



Hamann (center) was the only woman on the University of Chicago's Committee on Cancer, ca. 1947. Credit: [University of Chicago Photographic Archive, apf3-00291](#), Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

name at the Chicago-area NorthShore hospital system.



Hamann as a young woman. Via Radiation Oncology Institute, "[Biographical Notes](#)"

By 1938, with the rise of the Nazi party, life in Germany had become precarious for Hamann due to her father's ties to socialism. She was able to participate in a professor exchange at the University of Chicago that led to positions in the Department of Radiology and at Billings Hospital, making her one of, if not the, first female radiation oncologists in the United States. She reorganized the department's section on radiation therapy and pursued her research interests in tissue dosage and treatment planning. As a German national during World War II, working only two blocks away from the [Manhattan Project's nuclear reactor experiments](#), and having lost her fingerprints from her work with radium, Hamann was viewed with suspicion by some of her colleagues, but her skill and commitment to her work kept her at the University of Chicago until 1948.

In 1948, Hamann was persuaded to join the staff of Evanston Hospital, where she organized and directed the Department of Radiation Therapy for 14 years. She also joined the faculty of Northwestern University Medical School (NUMS) as an Assistant Professor of Radiology. In 1961 she was promoted to Associate Professor, becoming the first woman to achieve that position in the department. She taught at NUMS for the next 20 years, while maintaining her staff positions at Evanston Hospital as well as Swedish Covenant Hospital, despite being nearly blind from nearsightedness—although she had to put her face within millimeters of her patients to see them, she could still use her hands to accurately place radiation sources within patients for their treatment.

Anna Hamann died in Evanston on September 7, 1969, at age 75, from cancer that likely developed from her years of working with radioactive materials. Because of this, her name is included on the [Monument to the X-ray and Radium Martyrs of All Nations](#), in her native Hamburg. Multiple organizations honor her, including with a scholarship in her name from the German Society for Radiation Oncology and an endowed chair in radiation medicine in her

### Selected References

"[History: Radiation Therapy](#)," The University of Chicago Department of Radiology. Accessed March 11, 2025.

Willy, Ralph G. "[Anna Hamann, M.D.](#)" *Radiology* 96, no. 2 (August 1970): 457-458.