



IN MEMORIAM



**Eleanor B. Rodgeron McKinnon, MD,
1909-2007**

Most of us knew Eleanor late in her life, when the physicians with whom she had worked were gone. Yet she leaves behind much that speaks of her century on earth.

Perhaps she herself would claim her remarkable family as her major achievement. For 10 years she left a busy OB practice to be with them. The beautifully written article in the Bee after her death was written by her son, and we include it here, with an article from Stanford, where she was an undergraduate.

We offer here, in memory of Eleanor, a collage of photographs, and personal anecdotal sketches by those of us who wish to remember her in a way she would appreciate: in prose.

- John Loofbourow, MD

DR. ELEANOR RODGERSON and her mother shopped at my father's meat market where I helped after school and on weekends. A friendship began then and spanned over 60 years. During World War II, customers were grumpy from the rationing of foods and commodities and the delay in service. Whenever Dr. Rodgeron came into the store, she was like a breath of fresh air. She was patient, cheerful, and thoughtful; it was a pleasure serving her. Her graciousness in accepting inconveniences and changes reflected a characteristic evident throughout her life.

In Dr. Rodgeron's kindness and concern for those in need, she volunteered obstetrical and gynecological services to unwed mothers at Fairhaven Home. She also accommodated a large segment of Chinese women in Sacramento who wanted to give birth at home attended by a woman physician. Despite a demanding schedule, Dr. Rodgeron took time, too, to give insight and answer questions from my sister and me about a career in medicine. My sister also became a physician. Dr. Rodgeron continued to be a mentor to many, including my family and me.

Remembered always will be Dr. Rodgeron's inspiration and encouragement to improve the quality of life of others. Remembered always will be her teaching and her leading through example. My family and I shall miss her greatly.

- Frank Chinn, MD



Eleanor was the third OBG doc in Sacramento, and the first woman. On her arrival, one of her colleagues was very discouraging, stating she would never survive, as he had been practicing for three years and barely made ends meet. The other, however, welcomed and encouraged her, ceding half his caseload to her, including the Fairhaven Hospital for unwed mothers.

Moreover, the large and influential Chinese community preferred a woman physician who would agree to attend deliveries at home. Her practice prospered.

Dad (Donald McKinnon, MD) was battalion surgeon at Iwo Jima and on surviving the war, he was shocked to find that Eleanor had bought a beautiful home on 38th Street, one he was sure they could never pay for. He consoled himself by stocking the new refrigerator with a six-pack of beer. But Eleanor claimed that her refrigerator was not for beer!

During a very severe case of postpartum hemorrhage at Mercy Hospital, the head nurse left to fetch a priest, apparently feeling the soul was in danger. Although the patient survived, Eleanor soundly lectured the nurse, telling her to never leave in the midst of a medical emergency. The following day, it was Dr. Rodgerson who was asked by the administration to resign. Only by apologizing, was she able to continue on the staff.

- Jane McKinnon

Dr. Rodgerson was a very quiet, polite and unassuming person. She seemed to enjoy listening more than talking, something we could all do better. She certainly enjoyed writing and regularly attending our Editorial Committee meetings. Her book, *Adobe Bricks and Steel*, published by the Medical Society, is a fascinating look at the early history of our local hospitals and homes for the sick. Those who spoke at her memorial service enlightened the audience with fascinating facts and stories that illustrated just how special she was. Imagine her in medical school at Stanford, hoping to become an OB/GYN, and being told that she could not attend a seminar of birth control with the male students.



- William A. Sandberg

The UC Davis library holds a five-foot shelf of Eleanor Rodgerson manuscripts, including priceless letters she wrote to her family, about her OBG residency in the Chicago Women's Center. She tells of 1938 Chicago, dating, courting, and inter and intra-hospital politics. Of home deliveries that seem incredible today, attended by interns and supervised by residents: posteriors, twins, forceps extractions, breeches, versions, retained placentas and management of the various bleeds, in-home transfusions, difficult episiotomy repairs under marginal conditions.

She describes the social and physical world where these took place, including a mother who insisted on side positioned labor followed by an uneventful, on the floor, knee chest delivery. Eleanor was always a writer, and consequently, a reader, eager to find a worthwhile new or old book. As a member of the Editorial Committee her later work was reflective, pensive, personal, and brief, in contrast to those of us who can't easily hold our tongue, or keyboard in check.

Though she was wife, mother, writer, and the first woman OBG physician in Sacramento, she was much more. Eleanor Rodgerson was the living example of what is possible if one has lived long, fully, wisely, and well. In her 10th decade, her carriage was erect and elegant, as was her demeanor, appearance, and comportment. She radiated quiet strength, and dignity.

She felt it was a sign of respect for self and for others to look and be her best. She was unafraid to act decisively based on her own conclusions. When she started her practice here, her lab coats were tailored, with inside pockets to keep the stethoscope from flopping out grotesquely. She designed her first office, including the front entrance,

layout, even furniture and exam tables. While husband Don was in Iwo Jima, unaware, she bought their first home on 38th Street, which would be their last home as well.

She was not reticent to voice her personal opinion, and occasionally did so with some intensity. Yet she was reticent to speak of herself; one had to pull her tongue for her to do so. Eleanor was a living lesson in life, and in its constant companion, death. We can do no better than to try to honor her example.

- John Loofbourow, MD



During the last five years or so, I probably attended about 50 meetings of the Editorial Committee with Eleanor, commonly sitting next to or across from her. I learned that she had graduated from the same medical school as I, and that she had practiced Ob-Gyn in Sacramento, but little else about her career. She introduced me to *The Number One Ladies Detective Agency* by Alexander McCall Smith, and we discussed that and several other books written by that author. She obviously admired good writing and I know of no one who didn't consider hers some of the best.

There were other subjects that we discussed but I can't recall anything monumental. My remembrance is of a very pleasant, modest, and unassuming lady, always a lady in every sense of the word, a woman of strong and steadfast character with many important accomplishments. But she was a lady of the present, someone living for the daily pleasure of what she was doing now, with little thought of past achievements. She made me feel good about being ordinary.

- Bill Peniston, MD

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