

## **A Tribute to Dr. Anne Wight Phillips**

**(Boston Globe article – February 22, 2009)**

February 22, 2009 Anne Wight Phillips, whose pioneering work as a surgeon in the 1940s made her a major force in breaking barriers against women doctors, would not have sought the headlines for that particular feat.

But in the 1970s and 1980s, she welcomed the attention to promote a cause dear to her heart that would save lives threatened by fire: her belief that prevention was the key and that the chief killer of fire victims was lung damage by smoke inhalation.

"Doctor scolds fire chiefs for needless risk," headlined a 1972 Globe story about Dr. Phillips's address before an international chiefs' conference on fire prevention and control in Cleveland, chiding them for "taking pride to be known as a smoke-eater."

Dr. Phillips, described by newspaper reports as the first woman surgeon to operate at Massachusetts General Hospital, died Feb. 12 of respiratory arrest at Clark House of Fox Hill Village in Westwood. She was 91.

Dr. Phillips became nationally recognized in the field of burn research and fire prevention and, in 1973, President Richard M. Nixon appointed her to the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control.

Her son, Asa E. Phillips III, of Weston, said Dr. Phillips started at MGH in 1949 and was believed to be the first woman to perform major surgical procedures there.

"Anne's legacy is shown in the contributions women have made [in medicine] and will make. She was clearly a pioneer," said Dr. Paul S. Russell of Westwood, former chairman of the MGH department of surgery.

At first, Dr. Phillips worked as an associate on the surgical team of Dr. Oliver Cope, internationally known for his treatment of burn victims.

Phillips said his mother was at MGH from the 1940s to the 1960s and remained technically on staff there until the 1980s.

Colleagues lauded her role in the treatment of burn victims with Dr. Cope, who died in 1994.

"Not only did Anne become aware of how best to care for burn patients because of Dr. Cope, she was involved with him at the Shriner's" burn center. In 1974, Dr. Phillips founded the nonprofit Smoke, Fire and Burn Foundation and directed it for 30 years.

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With it, she developed the first school "smoke drill," which, her son said, "was taught to millions of schoolchildren across the country. She took part in the creation of fire safety films and stronger flammable fabrics standards and talked about fire safety at local schools."

Her theory that smoke inhalation was the leading cause of death among fire victims, Russell said, was "very important because many burn patients die of injuries to the breathing tubes. Anne was a kind of indomitable soul."

Dr. Andrew L. Warshaw, chief of surgery at MGH, said he believed Dr. Phillips was "the first woman surgeon on the faculty at MGH," a Harvard teaching hospital. The work she had done, he said, "had a long, lasting impact" on the field of fire prevention and, as a member of Dr. Cope's team, on the care and therapy of burn victims."

Three years ago, the Washington-based, nonprofit Home Safety Council and the Congressional Fire Services Institute, representing the fire caucus on Capitol Hill, established the Anne W. Phillips Award to recognize the contributions of others in the same cause.

Meri-K Appy, council president, said the award was inspired by Dr. Phillips's minority report as a member of the presidential commission, urging a greater emphasis on fire safety education. "Anne stood alone and was passionate about her beliefs." Appy said. "She was a hugely accomplished person with a huge sense of humor."

"Mother was a very determined woman interested in other people," said her daughter, Anne Phillips Ogilby, of Belmont. "She didn't really care whether you were the queen or the cab driver, she was going to treat every person the same. She was a warm and loving mother with a wonderful sense of humor."

Dr. Phillips' father had been a lawyer and her grandfather in the newspaper business, but she knew at the age of 5 that she wanted to be a doctor. "Mother was very determined about it," Ogilby said.

She was born at home in Brookline, where she grew up, attended the Park School and graduated from Winsor School in Boston in 1935. She graduated from Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania in 1939.

She had wanted to go to Harvard Medical School, but women were not yet accepted there. She enrolled in the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania, one of the few medical schools then accepting women, and earned her medical degree in 1943.

Her first residency was at Burlington County Hospital at Mount Holly, N.J. "On the first night," she wrote for a talk she gave, "I had 130 patients in my care. In the succeeding night and weeks, you worked for 100 hours a week at 4 cents-an-hour."

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She had wanted a senior surgical residency, but because Burlington County had none open to women, she moved on to Laird Memorial Hospital in Montgomery, West Va., which did. Many of her patients were coal miners, often hurt in mine accidents.

In the late 1940s, when the country was concerned about nuclear radiation from atomic bombs, Dr. Phillips trained briefly at the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies in Tennessee. While there, she served on the federal Atomic Energy Commission.

In 1956, she married Asa E. Phillips, Jr., a Boston attorney. The family lived in Brookline for many years, and spent summers in Seal Harbor, Maine, where the couple were avid sailors and played tennis into their 80s. Dr. Phillips moved to Fox Hill Village 12 years ago after the death of her husband.

At 87, Dr. Phillips wrote the novel, "The Corners In Time," about a woman who becomes a doctor and the struggles she faced. Her second novel, "The Foothills of Happiness," is in publication.

Perhaps among her most accomplishments was educating others what to do in a fire. There is a favorite photo of herself that appeared in the Globe in 1983. She is surrounded by children at the Runkle School in Brookline with a poster that warns, "Stay Below Smoke."

"The first rule of fire safety," she is quoted as telling the children, is, "Get on the floor and crawl as low as possible."

There is no telling, Appy said, how many lives Anne Phillips has saved.

Besides her son and her daughter, Dr. Phillips leaves four grandchildren. A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. on March 28 at First Parish, Brookline.■

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