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African Americans have faced many hardships in their quests to becoming medical and health professionals. African American women undoubtedly received the worst of these adversities. Nonetheless, they prevailed and accomplished their goals in the face of their troubles. Drs. Justina Laurena Carter Ford, Georgia Rooks Dwelle, and Natalia M. Tanner are just a few of the early pioneers of African American women in the pediatric medical profession. These women are featured in the National Library of Medicine’s “Changing the Face of Medicine,” focusing on each of their personal success as physicians along with other prominent female physicians of all races.

Dr. Justina Laurena Carter Ford was born in Knoxville, Illinois in 1871. “Dr. Ford attended Hering Medical College in Chicago and graduated in 1899” (“Ford”). After a short time in Alabama, she moved to Denver, Colorado in hopes to seek better employment opportunities (“Ford”). “Although she was excluded from working in actual hospitals”, that did not hinder her spirits (“Ford”). “She began a private practice in which she was often called ‘The Lady Doctor’ ” (“Ford”). Dr. Ford specialized in obstetrics, gynecology, and pediatrics (“Ford”). “While most of the babies she delivered were African American, she committed to delivering babies of all races” (“Ford”). “Eventually, she was asked on board the staff at the Denver General Hospital” (“Ford”). “ She was the first African American woman physician to become licensed to practice in the state of Colorado and remained the only one until two years before her death in 1952” (“Ford”). Before her death, “she was also accepted into the Denver Medical Society” (“Ford”). Dr. Ford faced many obstacles as an African American woman, trying to achieve success in a white male-dominated profession. As a result of her hard work and determination, she is held in high esteem for her accomplishments

Dr. Georgia Rook Dwelle was born in Albany, Georgia in 1884 (“Dwelle”). Being the daughter of a religious man,” she attended the Walker Baptist Institute and later the Spellman Seminary, where her father had become a trustee” (“Dwelle”). Once she graduated, she attended Meharry Medical College for four years, graduating in 1904 (“Dwelle”). “Afterwards, she went back to Georgia to sit for the State Medical Board Exam and received the highest score that year” (“Dwelle”). “ In 1906, she began practicing in Atlanta where she specialized in obstetrics and pediatrics” (“Dwelle”). “Due to the poor health conditions of Atlanta’s poor African Americans, she opened the Dwelle Infirmary” (“Dwelle”). Dwelle Infirmary was “Atlanta’s first hospital for blacks” in the community as well as the “first obstetrical hospital that provided extended-stay care for black women” (“Dwelle”). The hospital offered blacks many services that they had never been able to receive such as a “ ‘well-baby’ and Georgia’s first venereal disease clinic” (“Dwelle”). “It also set up the first “Mother’s Club” for black women, aiding soon-to-be mothers with pre- and post-natal care” (“Dwelle”). Dr. Dwelle was humanitarian in all aspects as she took on various community-building roles in Atlanta.

To top off all of her successes, “she was made vice-president of the National Medical Association” (“Dwelle”). This, of course, is a “black professional organization for physicians” created in response to the exclusion of blacks from the American Medical Association (“Dwelle”). “She also was chairman of the Association’s Pediatric” and held membership in a host of health care organizations (“Dwelle”). Dr. Georgia Rooks Dwelle died in 1977 (“Dwelle”). While she faced discrimination and difficulties in establishing herself as a physician like Dr. Ford, Dr. Dwelle decided to stay in the South. She felt it her duty to stay and help out the blacks in her own community. Through her mighty efforts, she dedicated her life to countless others and made positive strides to increase the health of African Americans in Atlanta, Georgia.

Dr. Natalia M. Tanner was born in 1922 in Jackson, Mississippi (“Tanner”). Tanner landed at Meharry Medical College after transferring from Fisk University and the University of Chicago (“Tanner”). “She graduated from Meharry in 1946 in the top five of her class” (“Tanner”). “She was an intern at Harlem Hospital in New York and returned to complete her pediatric residency at the University of Chicago” (“Tanner”). “Tanner went on to become the first African American fellow of the American Association of Pediatrics while living in Illinois” (“Tanner”). “Afterwards, she moved to Detroit, but the Michigan chapter did not as easily accept her” (“Tanner”). “She applied for membership of the Detroit Pediatric Society and did not receive any feedback” (“Tanner”). After some push back from Dr. Tanner, “she became the first African American to be certified by the pediatric board to practice” (“Tanner”). “ In 1952, Dr. Tanner became the first black hired at the Children’s Hospital of Michigan, where she served as an attending physician” (“Tanner”). In an effort to expand childcare, “Dr. Tanner created a liaison committee between three organizations of which she was a member: the Society for Adolescent Medicine, the National Committee on Adolescence for the AAP, and the pediatric section of the NMA” (“Tanner”).

Perhaps most rewarding of all, “in 1983, she became the first African American and woman to be appointed president of the Michigan Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics” (“Tanner”). Dr. Natalia M. Tanner has been wholly acknowledged for her insurmountable progresses in the pediatric field as a black woman. She pioneered through difficult times and her successes shed light on a path to a medical career for all minorities.

These very distinguished and renowned women physicians broke through barriers to accomplish their goals and dreams. They were unwavering in their dedication and commitment to helping African Americans obtain better healthcare. Despite the difficulties they faced, these women showed true perseverance. During their time, it was unforeseen all of the accomplishments they would go on to achieve. The stories of Dr. Justina Ford, Dr. Georgia Dwelle, and Dr. Natalia Tanner serve as a reminder of the great strides made by African Americans in the medical profession.

Works Cited

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