

# Elise Strang L'Esperance

— *January 21, 1959*

The illustrious career of one of America's outstanding women of medicine came to an end when Dr. Elise Strang L'Esperance died on January 21, 1959. For a large part of her professional career, Dr. L'Esperance was a member of the faculty of Cornell University Medical College, first in the Department of Pathology and later in the Department of Public Health and Preventive Medicine. Dr. L'Esperance was born in Yorktown, New York, the daughter of Dr. Albert Strang, physician, and Kate DePew Strang. She received her medical degree from the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmity for Women and Children and then served an internship at the Babies Hospital in New York City. After several years in practice, Dr. L'Esperance returned to laboratory and research work on the staff of Dr. William H. Park of the Tuberculosis Research Commission of the New York City Board of Health. In 1910 she joined the staff of Dr. James Ewing in the Department of Pathology, Cornell University Medical College, first as assistant, then as instructor, and finally as Assistant Professor, which post she held from 1920 to 1932. This appointment marked the first time that a woman had attained professorial rank at Cornell University Medical College. In addition to her work with Dr. Ewing, Dr. L'Esperance served as pathologist on the staff of a number of hospitals in New York City. During this period, she published reports of work in tuberculosis immunology and then a series of studies on cancer problems, including primary hepatoma, gynecological tumors, and Hodgkin's disease.

In 1932, Dr. L'Esperance together with her sister Miss May Strang founded the Strang Tumor Clinic at the New York Infirmity in memory of their mother, Kate DePew Strang. It was during her directorship of this clinic that she came to realize the need for a clinic, in addition to the tumor and diagnostic clinic, which could provide periodic examinations for asymptomatic patients as a preventive measure against the development of cancer. As a consequence, in 1937, Dr. L'Esperance and her sister founded the Kate DePew Strang Cancer Prevention Clinic at the New York Infirmity. This was followed in 1940 by a similar clinic of the same name at Memorial Hospital. These clinics, in continuous operation since their founding, have demonstrated the feasibility of periodic examination as a tool in preventive medicine and have served as forerunners of a large cancer detection center program throughout this country and abroad. In addition to the public service rendered in this important area, Dr. L'Esperance devoted much of her attention to professional education in the field of cancer preventive examinations and cancer control. This included an encouraging welcome to doctors who wished to observe or participate in the clinic and the support of physicians and surgeons in training, particularly women. Dr. L'Esperance always

maintained a vigorous devotion to the importance of women in medicine, and was helpful to many during their period of undergraduate and postgraduate training.

For her outstanding achievements in cancer education, Dr. L'Esperance received in 1942 the Clement Cleveland medal of the New York City Cancer Committee, a division of the American Cancer Society. In 1946 she received the Friendship Award for eminent achievement from the American Women's Association, and, in 1947, the Medallion of Honor of the Women's International Exposition for outstanding achievements in the field of cancer. In 1951, Dr. L'Esperance received the Albert Lasker Award of the American Public Health Association in recognition of the "eternal inscription written by her inspired application of preventive medicine to cancer control."

In 1946, Dr. L'Esperance was drafted by the American Medical Women's Association to establish and act as editor of its official publication, the *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association*. In 1948, she left the editorship of the *Journal* to become president of the Association. She served on the board of this organization for many years as well as on the executive committee of the board of trustees of the New York Infirmity, and on the board of managers of Memorial Hospital and Memorial Center for Cancer and Allied Diseases—appointments to which she loyally devoted her attention until a very short time before her death. For many years, Dr. L'Esperance was a member of the board of directors and of the executive committee of the New York City Cancer Committee.

Outside her profession, Dr. L'Esperance attained a national reputation for horse breeding and horse showing. She owned and developed the Red Blind Stable in Pelham Manor and exhibited ponies in single and double, tandem, amateur, ladies, open, and state competitions throughout the eastern United States, including the National Horse Show at Madison Square Garden where she was a prominent exhibitor and the winner of blue ribbons and trophies on numerous occasions.

In the words of one of her close administrative associates, Dr. L'Esperance was unforgettable for "her energy, her vigorous intellectual approach to any problem, her humor and her generosity. She was a natural leader who could draw loyalty and hard work from all around her. Like all effective executives she had a good hard quality so that she could make decisions and stick to them even when decisions were painful. But back of this healthy hardness there was a big warm heart. No one knows how much she has done for others all through her life. She has always been a giver in the broadest meaning of the word."

In the words of a fellow physician and associate in cancer research, "It is impossible to estimate how many human lives the Strang Clinics which Dr. L'Esperance created have saved. . . . They are the first, largest, and most exemplary

of their kind, and have done much to stem the earlier public fear of cancer. . . . The public owes Dr. L'Esperance a great debt of gratitude because she has pointed out a new path for fighting cancer.”

*Emerson Day*