

Connie M. Guion

August 29, 1882 — April 29, 1971

When Connie Guion died at the New York Hospital, she had enjoyed for many years the undisputed title of “dean of American women physicians.” She achieved this eminence in spite of the fact that she had entered medicine later in life than most. For Connie Guion’s career, though a brilliant one, was not easy.

Born near Lincolnton, N.C., she was graduated from Wellesley College and then taught chemistry at Vassar and Sweet Briar Colleges, deferring her lifelong ambition to become a doctor to help put a younger sister through school.

She was the head of the chemistry department at Sweet Briar when she entered Cornell University Medical College, graduating in 1917 at the top of her class. She interned at Bellevue Hospital, practiced briefly in Columbia, S.C., and moved to New York in 1926.

Her large private practice included some of New York’s most distinguished families, and at 80 she was still making house calls and working twelve-to-fourteen-hour days.

Cornell University Medical College named her a professor of clinical medicine in 1946. The first woman doctor to achieve that rank, she was also the first woman to win the college Alumni Association’s Award of Distinction, to become an honorary member of the New York Hospital Board of Governors, in 1952, and to serve on the hospital’s Medical Board.

She was named medical woman of the year in 1954 by the American Medical Woman’s Association. Dr. Guion was a trustee of the Vincent Astor Foundation, the Joseph Collins Foundation, and the Helen Hay Whitney Foundation.

When Connie Guion’s life ended, she met death as she had lived her life, directly and with equanimity. It was like the final act in a theatre; as the lights were dimmed, her firm handclasp relaxed, a bow, a curtsy, and she left the stage. She was magnificent.

As a fellow physician, I was closely associated with her for some forty years in a wide range of endeavors. She opened the door of clinical medicine to students in the outpatient clinic and at the bedside. Many graduates of Cornell University Medical College can recall this initial and exciting experience with patients. House officers in the resident system of training gained much not only from her clinical acumen based on years of practice, but also from her approach to the individual patient, penetrating to the core of the circumstances upon which therapy

might depend. Her contributions to the training of many of this country's outstanding clinicians are well known to the profession at large.

Her relationship, the participation in the day's work, with the senior staff and their residents throughout the New York Hospital is legend. Benevolent and tolerant to her juniors, she was firm and demanding of her peers just as she was of herself. She was articulate and an evaluator of extraordinary facts relative to the patient, and little was ever left undone to establish the diagnosis and select the therapeutic measures that were most promising. Well demarcated differences of opinion may have at the moment tensed the atmosphere that was soon diffused by the security of knowledge that comes from diligence and integrity. Confronted by a clinical problem with which she was unfamiliar, she was frank to say she did not know but would seek out someone who did—she always carried through. This in particular was the basis for her being so often the doctor's doctor, being requested equally by her closest peers and her most able antagonists.

Perhaps that which immortalizes best the life of Connie Guion as an individual and a physician rested in her capacity to penetrate into the hearts and lives of patients, to know their trials and tribulations, and to understand their successes and their failures. She helped them. In physical ailment and mental apprehension she, in the true tradition of a member of a great profession, assumed the burden that overwhelmed them.

She was a physician for all seasons of the life span, from the bewilderment of childhood to the anxiety of old age. One example of this that I observed was her explanation to a boy of ten whose mother had had a major abdominal operation. He was perplexed and worried. Questions he had asked members of the family had brought forth deflecting replies, adding to his concern. Connie Guion, with pencil and paper, drew a diagram of what had been done with the assurance that what had been removed would not interfere with her life. That then small boy is now a member of the House of Commons. He has never forgotten her or her explanation.

In another instance, a patient with many responsibilities was found to have an incurable disease with a short life expectancy. Some in attendance felt the information should be withheld or glossed over on the basis it would crush his spirit. Connie Guion knew her patient. The facts were presented No one was ever more grateful. He moved quickly to put his affairs in order and provide for those involved. Fulfillment of obligations gave him peace of mind that did much to make his remaining days tolerable.

Knowledgeable, patient, understanding, and having great good common sense, her decisions were superb. Energy, ingenuity, and persistence rendered these quickly actual and effectual. She gave generously of her intellect and spirit to all.

There is for all heritage from the life of Connie Guion, an immortality of works, an attainment prompted by affection for her fellowman. We physicians who knew her, and we are many, join a far greater number that includes patients, friends, and co-workers in extracurricular projects, in proclaiming that by her being our lives have been enriched.

Dr. Guion is survived by two sisters, Mrs. O. E. Hunt of El Cerrito, California, and Ridie Guion of Wilton, Connecticut.

Frank Glenn, M.D.