Harriet Pearson Dustan

Harriet Pearson Dustan, pioneer in clinical cardiovascular research and dedicated American Heart Association volunteer, succumbed to lung cancer on June 25, 1999, after a lengthy illness. Dr Dustan’s long and productive career spanned the modern era of research on the pathophysiology and treatment of hypertension in humans. Discoveries made by Dr Dustan and colleagues in the 1950s have influenced the practice of medicine for nearly a half century. For example, she was the first person ever to give sodium nitroprusside to a human being. Her descriptions of the efficacy of sodium nitroprusside in the treatment of severe hypertension and hypertensive crisis formed the basis of extensive contemporary use of that potent and reliable vasodilator drug in many areas of cardiovascular medicine.

Other firsts for Dr Dustan and her Cleveland Clinic research group were the discovery that thiazide diuretics potentiate the blood pressure–lowering effects of other classes of antihypertensive drugs; description of the rheumatic and febrile syndrome associated with hydralazine treatment; successful long-term treatment of malignant hypertension; clinical and pathological characterization of the syndrome of renovascular hypertension, including histological characterization of the various forms of renal artery disease and assessment of the effects of surgical revascularization of the kidney(s); definition of the hemodynamics and renal functional defects of primary aldosteronism; elucidation of the importance of intravascular volume in the pathogenesis of systemic hypertension; and description of the hyperdynamic circulation that is characteristic of the early stages of hypertension. In more recent years, she made major contributions to our understanding of the pathophysiology of obesity-related hypertension and the role of dietary salt in the pathogenesis of hypertension. Importantly, all of these studies of human disease were performed in patients, a point worthy of note in this era of the vanishing clinical investigator.

Harriet Dustan was born in Craftsbury Common, Vt, where she received her elementary and secondary education. She graduated cum laude with a bachelor of science degree from the University of Vermont in 1942 and a doctor of medicine degree in 1944. After postdoctoral training at the Mary Fletcher Hospital in Burlington, Vt, and the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, Canada, Dr Dustan moved to the Cleveland Clinic (Cleveland, Ohio) as a research fellow in 1948. In 1951, she joined the staff of the Cleveland Clinic Research Division, serving as its vice chairman from 1971 to 1977. She joined the University of Alabama at Birmingham faculty as director of the Cardiovascular Research and Training Center and professor of medicine in 1977. She was named distinguished professor of the university in 1985, and in 1987, she became 1 of 12 Distinguished Physicians of the United States Veterans Administration. She retired in 1990.

Dr Dustan’s numerous and important contributions to public service reflect her lifelong belief in volunteerism and the importance of “paying back” society for successes gained. She was a longtime energetic volunteer for the American Heart Association, serving as its president in 1976-77 (the second woman to have done so) and was a driving force in establishing the journal Hypertension. She served as its first editor-in-chief and established the journal as the premier publication in the hypertension field. She also served on numerous boards and committees in a variety of areas, including the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, where she was a member of the Advisory Council and chaired the Hypertension Task Force and the Third Joint National Committee on Detection, Evaluation,
and Treatment of High Blood Pressure (JNCIII), the Board of Trustees of the University of Vermont, and the Rhodes Scholar Selection Committee for Alabama.

Dr Dustan was elected to virtually all of the honor societies that are accessible to the academic physician. These include, among many others, the Central Society for Clinical Research, the American Society for Clinical Investigation, the Association of American Physicians, and the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. She was the first woman ever to serve on the board and the first woman regent of the American College of Physicians. She received honorary degrees from the Medical College of Wisconsin, the University of Vermont, Cleveland State University, and St. Michaels College. Her many awards include the Gold Heart Award of the American Heart Association; the Distinguished Achievement Award of the Council for High Blood Pressure Research of the American Heart Association; Distinguished Service Awards from Modern Medicine and the University of Vermont Medical Alumni Association; honorary membership in Sociedad Chilena de Cardiologia, Sociedad Peruana de Cardiologia, Sociedad Medica de Santiago, and Universidad Catolica de Chile; and the Edward Fries Award from the National Conference on High Blood Pressure Control. She was selected by her fellow faculty members as distinguished faculty lecturer of the Medical Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Beyond all of her distinctions and achievements, Dr Dustan will be remembered for her wit, her dedication to her patients, and her strong commitment to academic values. She was a wonderful role model, colleague, and mentor. She is sorely missed.

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