

Ex-patient thanks doctor with concert

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Dr. Helen Brooke Taussig, the Johns Hopkins physician who pioneered the concept of the "blue baby" operation in the 1940s, will get a chance this week to meet one of her early success stories.

The 87-year-old doctor will see one of her first patients Tuesday when Samuel Sanders performs at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in an Artist Recital being given in honor of Mrs. Taussig.

Although Mrs. Taussig conducted a 20-year follow-up study of blue babies operated on between 1944 and 1950, this will be first time she has met Mr. Sanders since 1947, when he had the operation at age 9.

"I think it will be lovely to see him," Mrs. Taussig said in an interview at her retirement home at the Crosslands in Kennett Square, Pa. "I was delighted to hear about the concert and the opportunity to meet him again."

The blue-baby syndrome is a condition in which a child is born with a congenital heart defect that, because too little blood is able to pass to the lungs for oxygenation, results in a bluish skin color and the inability to lead a normal, active life.

The operation, first performed by Johns Hopkins doctor Alfred Blalock and commonly referred to as the "Blalock-Taussig shunt," is responsible for saving the lives of more than 12,000 children.

Mr. Sanders, 48, a pianist who has taught at the Juilliard School in New York City for 20 years, took a position at the Peabody last fall.

"I wouldn't be up there performing on that stage if it were not for Helen Taussig," he said. "In fact, I wouldn't be here at all. I feel that in coming back to Peabody and Hopkins, my life has come full circle, because it was Hopkins that gave me life in the first place."

Mrs. Taussig, a recipient of the Medal of Freedom — the highest civilian award a U.S. president can bestow — also was the first woman to be elected president of the American Heart Association.

It is ironic that one of the most famous cardiac pediatricians almost did not become a doctor.

Back in the 1920s, when she was living in Cambridge and considering studying medicine, her father suggested that she enter the newly established Harvard School of Public Health.

"They told me that women could study at the School for Public Health, but that they couldn't get a degree," she said. "Now who would do something like that?"

Instead, she began taking courses at the Harvard Medical School even though the school did not admit women as degree candidates at the time.

"And not only couldn't we get a



Dr. Helen Brooke Taussig will be honored for her work on the blue-baby syndrome with a concert Tuesday at the Peabody Institute.

degree, but can you guess which classes we weren't allowed to take? Anatomy, obstetrics and gynecology," she said.

As a result, in 1923 she moved to Baltimore to enter the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, which always had admitted women. In 1930, she was put in charge of the children's heart clinic.

"Getting into Hopkins at the time was easier than getting a hospital appointment later on," she said. "And as a woman you really weren't put on committees — but at least you then had more time for your work."

Although Mrs. Taussig retired in

1963, her life has been as busy, if not more so, since her days as a Hopkins doctor.

"Everyone thinks that when you retire you have nothing to do," she said. "Instead, there's so much to do that you wonder how you ever got anything done before."

Her bibliography has over 140 listings and she is working on a study concerning heart malformation in birds.

In addition, she is a member of the international branch of the Physicians for Social Responsibility, a board member of the Right to Die organization, and an outspoken critic of the Right to Life organization.