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**HEADLINE:** Dr. Helen Taussig pioneer cardiologist; 'Blue babies': Hopkins physician's breakthrough work created pediatric heart surgery.

**BODY:**

**FOR Helen Brooke Taussig**, it was a lifetime affair of the heart. Through her scientific vision and human compassion, thousands of gasping "blue babies" once condemned to an early death or severe invalidism gained a new life.

The Johns Hopkins pediatric cardiologist conceived of an operation to repair heart birth defects in children whose blood was starved of oxygen, turning their skin a bluish hue.

The historic 1944 operation connected a major artery out of the heart to the artery going into the lungs, increasing the vital supply of oxygen to the blood. That medical breakthrough at Johns Hopkins laid the foundation of modern heart surgery.

Taussig was acclaimed by her colleagues as the First Lady of American Medicine, the founder of pediatric cardiology. Hopkins physicians who trained under her demanding tutelage proudly dubbed themselves "the Loyal Knights of Taussig."

But her greatest reward was the enduring love of the children the operation had saved — "my babies," Taussig fondly called them — corresponding with them for decades after their operations. Her scrapbooks chronicled their lives, the patients held regular reunions with her and not a few named their daughters Helen.

"Her fundamental concepts have made possible the modern surgery of the heart, which enables countless children to lead productive lives," read the inscription on the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, presented to her in 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

That award came just after she sounded the alarm on dangers of Thalidomide, a popular sedative in Europe.

Alerted by a former pupil, she made a fact-finding tour of West Germany and England and uncovered direct links to horrifying birth defects: children born without limbs, whose mothers had taken the drug during pregnancy. Her reports were instrumental in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's decision to keep Thalidomide off the domestic market, averting more widespread human tragedy.

She continued to champion tougher new-drug testing, particularly screening for possible birth defects.

Long into official retirement, Taussig continued to investigate rheumatic fever and other childhood ailments of the heart. One-third of her 129 scientific articles were published after retirement from Hopkins in 1963. Her text on congenital heart abnormalities remains a classic in the field.

She was the first woman pediatrics professor at Hopkins, the first woman president of the American Heart Association, the first woman master of the exclusive American College of Physicians. In 1973, she was in the first class of 20 persons inducted into the Women's Hall of Fame.

The tall, intense woman with piercing blue eyes had experienced the prejudice of the male-dominated medical world: denied degree-candidate admission to Harvard in her hometown, receiving full professor rank at Hopkins long after her worldwide acclaim.

Taussig was a redoubtable advocate for female equality in medicine. But acknowledging that men were more likely to become practicing physicians, she fought against gender quotas for medical schools.

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Physical hurdles in her life were overcome with characteristic tenacity: dyslexia that hampered her early education reinforced her will to learn; deafness as an adult forced her to use her sensitive hands to "listen" to the patient's heart instead of using a stethoscope; tuberculosis made her keenly aware of the need to help those lacking physical strength.

"Despite her brilliance and prominence, she never lost her simplicity, kindness or compassion," recalled Dr. Denton A. Cooley, the famed heart surgeon and a Taussig pupil.

Even in the impressive pantheon of Johns Hopkins medicine, **Helen Brooke Taussig** stands out as a rare human being.