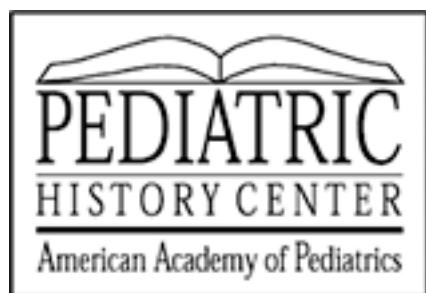


The Creation of a Model Pediatric Ward for African American Children in 1920s Kansas City

Jane F. Knapp, MD^{a,b}, Robert D. Schremmer, MD^b



The summer of 1919 is remembered for some of the worst race riots in American history. Dubbed the Red Summer by James Weldon Johnson, at least 25 major riots rocked American cities, and more than 52 African Americans were lynched.¹ Although provocations varied, a root cause of the racial tension was the disappointment felt by African American World War I veterans. They had hoped that their military service would earn them equality at home. Instead they returned to a society where the majority of American states enforced Jim Crow racial segregation laws.

As in many American cities, Kansas City hospitals, including Children's Mercy Hospital (CMH), were racially segregated in the early 20th century. African Americans went to the "Negro hospitals," where facilities were substandard and overcrowded.² The mortality rate for Kansas City's black population was nearly double that of the country's.³ Children fared no better: the black infant mortality rate was close to double that of whites. Common causes of child death were prematurity, diarrhea, and pneumonia.^{4,5}

Conditions were worsened by limited numbers of black physicians. The 1910 Flexner report prompted the closure of all but 2 African American medical schools, Howard University and Meharry Medical College. Although Flexner recommended coeducation for men and women, he accepted racial segregation in medical schools. Furthermore, education gaps between

black and white physicians were widened when he recommended that black physicians be trained differently at a more basic level as "sanitarians" with an emphasis on "serving" their people.^{6,7} The overall effect was to reinforce segregated and unequal medical training, thereby limiting education and practice opportunities for African Americans.⁷

It was in this climate that physicians Katharine Berry Richardson and John Edward Perry partnered to improve health care for Kansas City's black children (Fig 1). Their collaboration created a model pediatric ward at Wheatley-Provident Hospital (WPH), acclaimed as the first of its kind in the country.⁸

OF LIKE MINDS

Perry was born in Clarksville, Texas, in 1870 to former slaves. His schooling started at age 9, but by 15 he matriculated to Bishop College in Marshall, Texas; he graduated from Meharry Medical College in 1895. He was a captain in the all-Negro unit in the Spanish-American War and then studied surgery in Chicago.⁹ In 1910, he founded the Perry Sanitarium in Kansas City which became WPH in 1915. He was an organizer of the National Negro Hospital Association, chairing the first Executive Committee in 1922. Perry's leadership in the Negro hospital movement promoted the necessity of separate hospitals as a practical response to racial segregation. Because of their exclusion from white medical societies, he believed that

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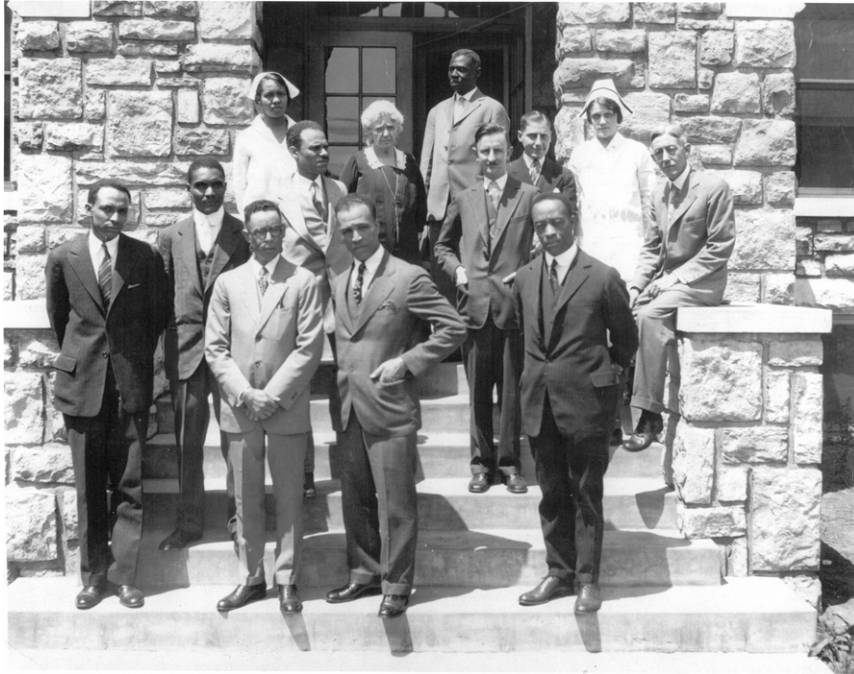


FIGURE 1
Katharine Berry Richardson (back row center) and John Edward Perry (second row, first person) gather on the steps of WPH with other physicians and nurses involved in the training program. Photo property of CMH archives.

black physicians needed separate hospitals to survive and develop professionally.¹⁰ Not all agreed. Many black physicians felt that this “accommodationist” strategy heightened professional isolation relegating them to Jim Crow institutions and ultimately delaying integration reforms.¹¹

Richardson was born in 1858 in Flat Rock, Kentucky. She was raised by her father, Stephen Berry, an outspoken abolitionist. Katharine attended Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, then medical school at Pennsylvania Women’s College, graduating in 1887.¹² Mid-19th-century reform movements toward personal hygiene, diet, and sanitation were influential in steering women like Katharine Richardson toward medicine.¹³ In the 1890s, Richardson moved with her sister Alice, a dentist, to Kansas City. Women professionals were excluded from medical society membership, which was closely linked to hospital admitting privileges. Persevering, Alice and Katharine soon realized

their purpose in caring for children and in 1897 founded the Free Bed Association for Crippled, Deformed and Ruptured Children, which became CMH in 1916.¹² Katharine was an ardent suffragist and an outspoken pediatric advocate. She personified what women’s historians call maternalist politics, a brand of social activism that stressed the needs of poor women and children.

Although differing in gender and race, Perry and Richardson shared similar life experiences and were friends. Both believed in improving physician education. Both had experienced professional intolerance and marginalization. Both had founded hospitals for disadvantaged populations and tackled longstanding sociocultural barriers. Perry wrote that Richardson frequently talked with him about racial discrimination and on one occasion said, “Your experiences came so nearly paralleling my own that I always enjoy discussions with you”⁹ (p. 353).

Of CMH Perry said, “As one walks through the various departments, one observes that every race is represented except the Negro”¹⁴ (p. 126). This segregation and inequity haunted Richardson, whose efforts to develop a ward for black children at CMH had failed. After a decade of friendship, she told Perry, “Something must be done. May I come over and help build a children’s hospital at Wheatley?”¹⁴ (p. 126).

THE MODEL WARD

An 8-bed ward with accompanying outpatient clinics was planned. In January 1923, local philanthropist Frank Niles agreed to fund the first year’s operation for \$5000.¹⁵ The son of a physician, Niles was the ideal person for Richardson to approach because he was known to be a humanitarian and “a liberal supporter of several causes devoted exclusively to the Negro.”¹⁶

The city’s Council of Social Agencies endorsed developing facilities for black children to equal those at CMH and supported the training of black doctors and nurses.¹⁷ Pediatric education for black physicians and nurses was of paramount importance to Richardson and Perry. On January 27, 1923, 11 black physicians met at Richardson’s home to “procure data . . . regarding the training they wanted in pediatrics.”¹⁸

Richardson recruited 18 white physicians for the clinic and postgraduate training faculty (Fig 2). One was Robert McEwen Schauffler, CMH’s first volunteer physician. Another was Harry Gilkey, a 1922 CMH pediatric resident.

The model ward at WPH opened on April 19, 1923. The event was hailed as the beginning of a new day in health care among Negroes in Kansas City.¹⁹ An official of the National Child Conservation League stated that what was to be done for Negro children, physicians, and nurses at WPH had not been attempted anywhere else in the United States.⁸



FIGURE 2

A photo from Katharine Berry Richardson's scrapbook kept on the model ward at WPH. In her handwriting at the top, she describes Dr Robert Schauffler demonstrating a physical examination at the first clinic. Photo property of CMH archives.

Walter Maddux, MD, 1 of the first 3 African American pediatric residents, described the training as didactic instructions based on investigation of the literature, lectures, rounds, and special clinics. He noted, "These studies include anatomic and physiologic variations in the pre-nativity, infancy, childhood and adolescence periods; also orthopedic corrections, the hygienic and dietetic management of the respective periods, studies in prophylaxis, immunity and surgery, and the scope of internal medicine as related to children"¹⁴ (p. 127). On December 16, 1924, Maddux, Henry Lyons, MD, and Walter Caldwell, MD, received pediatric certificates signed by 23 white physicians. Walter Caldwell would be an active member of the medical staff at WPH until his death in 1960.

CONCLUSIONS

With the opening of the model ward at WPH, Richardson said, "at last the Children's Mercy Hospital has removed the final barrier to the realization of its purpose. It is now

for all children everywhere."²⁰ Although the relationship between CMH and WPH remained informal from a legal standpoint, Richardson wrote of the model ward as an extension of CMH that worked around the barriers of segregation. She labeled her scrapbook of correspondence, photographs, and newspaper clippings on the collaboration "Wheatley-Mercy Negro Hospital." If there were repercussions from her work at WPH in the form of lost donors or support, they are unrecorded in history. In fact, the model ward soon expanded to 25 beds with donations from both black and white supporters. In 1932, a single "no color line" bed was endowed for black children at CMH. Although this was a step forward, the pediatric ward at WPH remained important in narrowing the health care racial divide until the civil rights movement fully integrated Kansas City's hospitals.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CMH: Children's Mercy Hospital
WPH: Wheatley-Provident Hospital

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