Some Specialists

Agatha C. Hodgins, R.N.

It sometimes seems that the age of the pioneer is past; but Agatha C. Hodgins has not only been a pioneer in the difficult and scientifically exacting field of anesthesia, she has also developed a new field for the graduate nurse who is willing to prepare herself for it.

A graduate of the Boston City Hospital and Boston Lying-in Hospital, Miss Hodgins was placed in charge of anesthesia on Dr. Crile’s private ward service at Lakeside Hospital, Cleveland, Ohio, in 1909; later, when Dr. Crile became chief surgeon of that hospital, her work was extended to include all anesthesia service in the hospital. Lakeside was the first hospital in the world to perfect a plant to manufacture pure nitrous oxide gas, and its surgical clinic was among the first to demonstrate not only the fact that gas anesthesia could be given without cyanosis, but that the technic of administration could be so developed as to make possible and practical zones of anesthesia ranging from analgesia to deeper anesthesia. This absorbing work offered to Miss Hodgins full scope for the exercise of her ability as a skillful anesthetist, and was the background for the later development of her work as a teacher and a leader of unusual courage, individuality, and force, with undaunted faith in the ability of the educated nurse to meet the grave responsibility of this highly exacting and specialized field.

As early as 1912 a few nurses were admitted for instruction in gas anesthesia, and from this small beginning sprang the present Postgraduate School of Anesthesia. The war, coming early in 1914, interrupted plans for the future development of the school, since the first surgical unit for service in France, known as the Western Reserve University Unit, was organized and sailed for France in December of that year, Miss Hodgins accompanying it as chief anesthetist. This unit, delegated to service in the American Ambulance at Neuilly, France, was the first to introduce the use of nitrous-oxide anesthesia for war
surgery. Miss Hodgins, remaining on as anesthetist to the French Surgical Service, had the opportunity of demonstrating to an entirely new group the use of gas anesthesia as a protection against shock, and its particular usefulness in the case of gassed men, to whom the inhalation of ether was intolerably difficult.

Returning to America in 1915, Miss Hodgins found that the work of standardizing the postgraduate School of Anesthesia, putting it on a definite educational basis and outlining a course of study, an exacting and absorbing task. This was the first postgraduate school organized on this basis. Miss Hodgins, appointed director of the school, retained charge of the department of anesthesia.

America entered the war in 1917, and Lakeside Hospital Unit left for France in that same year. Nitrous-oxide anesthesia having been accepted by the United States Army for use abroad, it was imperative to train a sufficient number of anesthetists for the work, and in addition to send over with the unit as many anesthetists as could be spared from the Lakeside staff. These facts necessitated Miss Hodgins remaining in charge of Lakeside. It has been a matter of great pride to her that it was the work of the graduates of Lakeside Postgraduate School of Anesthesia, attached to the unit, that later had much to do with the request (made through Major Crile) for a unit of twenty anesthetists to teach anesthesia in the English Army. The little school was beginning to show results. Another contribution to England came years later when a graduate of the school, first successfully introduced gas anesthesia in India at the Miraj Hospital.

At the end of June, 1930, the school had over 500 graduates who had come from all over the country and after graduation were filling, in many instances, most important positions. This extraordinary educational achievement in so comparatively short a time has been carried on in addition to the constant demands of the large and active surgical clinics of Lakeside Hospital of Western Reserve University.

At the special request of the editor, Miss Hodgins contributed a section on nitrous-oxide-oxygen anesthesia to the Oxford Surgery. Later she was asked by one of the leading publishing companies to consider compiling her notes on anesthesia, collected for teaching purposes, for publication in the form of a textbook. Lakeside Hospital has allowed her notes to be multigraphed for the exclusive use of students of the School of Anesthesia, whose hope it is that Miss Hodgins will eventually put them together into the form of a textbook.

An extract from the history of the school, written only for future reference, expresses, we think, Miss Hodgins own viewpoint:

It is my own overwhelming conviction of the great importance of good anesthesia in the safeguarding of human life, not only in the protection from possible death but in the care and relief of the natural mental distress so often evident in patients having to undergo the ordeal of an operation—how lasting the damage created by fear is, we none of us know—it is this conviction that has kept me at the task of impressing by teaching and example these important truths upon the students for whose education in this work I have held myself primarily responsible. Frankly there are many avenues of endeavor that would have involved my life in less mental strain, less physical tire and more charm, but none that seemed to me so essentially vital and helpful to humanity.