Bernadine Healy (1944–2011) [1]

By: Darby, Alexis

During the twentieth century in the United States, Bernadine Patricia Healy was a cardiologist who served as the first female director of the National Institutes of Health [2] or NIH and the president of both the American Heart Association and the American Red Cross. Healy conducted research on the different manifestations of heart attacks in women compared to men. At the time, many physicians underdiagnosed and mistreated coronary heart disease in women. Healy’s research illustrated how coronary heart disease affected women. Healy was also the deputy science advisor to the United States president Ronald Reagan, and during her time at the NIH, she founded the Women’s Health Initiative. That initiative was a $625 million research study that aimed to determine how hormones [3] affected diseases specific to postmenopausal women. Through her research and leadership positions, Healy helped improve women’s healthcare in the US and helped expand the resources available for research into women’s health.

Healy was born on 4 August 1944 to Violet McGrath and Michael Healy in New York City, New York. Neither of her parents had completed high school, and they raised their four daughters while running a small perfume shop. Healy attended a school run by the local church for her elementary education. According to long-time friend and coworker, Donna Shalala, Healy realized she wanted to be a doctor at the age of twelve. Shalala said that the priest was worried Healy would become over-educated and forsake what he thought to be the role of a woman as a mother. Nevertheless, Healy's father argued with the priest to allow her to leave the religious school to attend Hunter College high school in Manhattan in New York City. Healy was admitted to the high school, and in 1962 she graduated first in her class.

In 1963, Healy started her undergraduate degree and began to pursue medical studies. Healy received a full-ride scholarship to Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where she studied chemistry and philosophy. She completed her undergraduate degrees in three years with honors, and was then admitted to Harvard Medical School [4] in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Healy was one of ten women in a class of 120 students. She graduated in 1970, and completed her residency in internal medicine from 1970 to 1972 at Johns Hopkins University [5] in Baltimore, Maryland. Healy accepted a position as a cardiac fellow at the same university in 1974.

A year later, Healy became a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University [5] in Baltimore, Maryland. Over the next three years, she served in different professorships at Johns Hopkins, including internal medicine and pathology. While at Johns Hopkins, she also became the first woman to be the assistant dean for postdoctoral programs and faculty development. Beginning in 1976, she directed the coronary care unit at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine [6] for the next six years, which meant that she oversaw the entire cardiac wing.

At Johns Hopkins, Healy conducted cardiac research, investigating heart disease in women. At the time, researchers primarily studied heart attacks in men. Healy began looking for occurrences of heart attacks in women. She found that the symptoms of heart disease and heart attacks manifest differently in women than in men, including a difference in pain location and severity. When doctors applied their knowledge of heart disease to women, they often did not diagnose or treat the disease in time, as the disease symptoms are different in men and in women. Healy called the phenomenon of not attributing male symptoms of heart disease to women “Yentl Syndrome.” The name refers to a nineteenth-century poem that had a female character named Yentl who had to dress like a man to be taken seriously in society.

At Hopkins, Healy met and married surgeon George Bulkley, with whom she had one daughter, Bartlett Bulkley. They divorced in 1981 shortly after Healy gave birth. The following year, Healy left Johns Hopkins after an all-male student fraternity made an obscene skit about her. According to a Washington Post obituary, instead of blaming the fraternity directly, Healy charged the dean of students with creating an environment that fostered and encouraged sexual harassment. The fraternity dissolved as a result, and Healy moved on to other professional endeavors.

In the 1980s, Healy began working in the government and nonprofit sectors. In 1984, Healy was appointed the deputy science advisor for US president Ronald Reagan. Her role was to advise him on how to respond to science and technology policies pertinent to the citizens of the United States. In that position, she focused her research on the use of human subjects in research and on the humane treatment of animals in research. After leaving her role as science advisor in 1985, Healy took a job as the chair of Cleveland Clinic's Foundation Research Institution in Cleveland, Ohio. In Cleveland, she practiced cardiology and acted as lead investigator for a research study that compared two methods of heart blockage repairs. She also initiated an educational
Sources

On 6 August 2011, Healy died from brain cancer at her home in Gates Mills, Ohio. Her death was discussed in her book Living Time: Faith and Facts to Transform Your Cancer Journey, which was published in 2007. In that book, Healy discussed her advice on proper treatment and care for different types of cancers, and her own personal anecdotes on her experiences with brain cancer.

Throughout her life, Healy was the recipient of numerous awards. She was named the Woman of the Year in Glamour magazine, was appointed into the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame, and was named the Humanitarian of the Year by the American Red Cross. According to Donna Shalala, a former US Secretary of Health and Human Services and friend of Healy, Healy never compromised her core beliefs and broke many metaphorical glass ceilings in the science and research field.

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