A licensed obstetrician and gynecologist, Pearl Tang worked to improve the health of women and children in Maricopa County, Arizona, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her work with the Maricopa County Health Department ranged from immunizations to preventing cervical cancer. Tang obtained federal grants and community support to establish various child and maternal health clinics throughout Maricopa County as chief of the Maricopa County Bureau of Maternal and Child Health. Tang established mobile clinics, including a clinic she called the Maternity Care Bus, to address the lack of access to medical care among rural women in Arizona. She also focused on family planning through education and the distribution of contraception. Tang's efforts in Maricopa County increased the delivery of maternal, child, and family planning care and helped lower Arizona's infant mortality rate.

Tang was born on 11 January 1922 in Shanghai, China, the fourth of five children to Mabel Wong and David Mao. Tang's father was born in Hawaii, studied medicine at the University of Kansas Medical School in Kansas City, Kansas, and went to China to teach. There he married and married Tang's mother, a native of China. At home, Tang's family spoke both Chinese and English. In an interview, Tang later described her parents as being more modern than other Chinese families, especially by educating all of their children, despite it being uncommon for Chinese girls to receive much education. Tang and her siblings attended private British schools from grade school to high school, as no free public education existed at the time in Shanghai. In 1938, Tang graduated from high school and in 1939, she began an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Aurora in Shanghai.

At the University of Aurora, Tang switched her degree to medicine and began an internship at the university's hospital, Hôpital Sainte-Marie (later Ruijin Hospital). In 1945, she graduated with a medical degree. After graduating, she moved to Québec City, Canada, for residency training in obstetrics and gynecology at Hôpital du St-Sacrement.

During Tang's residency, she corresponded with her future husband, Thomas Tang. In 1945, Tang had met him in China at a Thanksgiving dinner a church had organized for US soldiers. However, because it was considered inappropriate to date a foreign soldier, Tang never went on a date with him. Instead, they corresponded through letters while Tang was in Québec completing her residency, and while he was in the US completing his undergraduate degree at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California. In 1947, Tang completed her residency, and after converting to Catholicism, married her husband in Québec City. Afterwards, they moved to Phoenix, Arizona.

Although Tang possessed US citizenship through her father, as a Chinese immigrant, she faced many challenges. According to historian Mary Melcher, many in Phoenix discriminated against the Chinese community, and that hindered Tang's initial attempts to become a practicing physician. When Tang attempted to apply for a medical license to practice in Arizona, the State Board of Medical Examiners office denied her request because at the time foreign graduates of medical school were not allowed to take the licensing exam. Tang tried to apply to medical school to earn a US degree, but was told that because she already had a medical degree, she could not attend medical school again.

In 1948, Tang and her husband moved from Phoenix to Tucson, Arizona. Tang began a masters program in microbiology while her husband began a law degree, both at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Both graduated in 1950 and returned to Phoenix. Tang joined the U.S. Public Health Service Communicable Disease Center in Phoenix doing microbiology work studying diarrheal diseases.

In 1951, the Arizona State Board of Medical Examiners allowed Tang to take the licensing exam. Tang's husband, after graduating from law school, had successfully appealed to the State Board of Medical Examiners to get permission for Tang to take the exam. That year, Tang passed the exam. According to Tang, she was the first Asian woman to become a licensed physician in Arizona. In an interview, Tang stated that the board had been acting illegally by denying foreign and out-of-state physicians from applying for a license. She had been encouraged to sue the board, but decided that it was not the right time for this type of action.

Shortly after Tang received her medical license in 1951, her husband, a member of the US Army Reserves, was called to serve as a translator and traveled to Japan. In an interview, Tang reminisced about how she had wanted to go with him but did not have the money. To earn money for a round-trip flight ticket, she accepted a job as a supervising physician at a hospital on the San
Phoenix, awarded Tang a Lifetime Achievement Award for her work. After retirement, Tang’s husband died in July 1995. In 2015, the Diana Gregory Outreach Services Foundation, headquartered in the health department continued many of her initiatives. She became involved in many community programs and conferences.

During Tang’s career with the Maricopa Health Department, the infant mortality rate declined significantly. According to historian Melcher, Tang’s work not only lowered the rate in Maricopa County, but also in Arizona. By 1970, Arizona’s infant mortality rate was lower than the national average rate. Although Tang retired from the Maricopa County Health Department in October 1982, the health department continued many of her initiatives. She became involved in many community programs and conferences after retirement. Tang’s husband died in July 1995. In 2015, the Diana Gregory Outreach Services Foundation, headquartered in Phoenix, awarded Tang a Lifetime Achievement Award for her work.

Sources

5. Pearl Tang, interview by Mary Melcher, tape recording, 21 September 1999, Tape 1 (Tempe: Arizona Historical Society).
7. Pearl Tang, interview by Mary Melcher, tape recording, 28 September 1999, Tape 3 (Tempe: Arizona Historical Society).

A licensed obstetrician and gynecologist, Pearl Tang worked to improve the health of women and children in Maricopa County, Arizona, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her work with the Maricopa County Health Department ranged from immunizations to preventing cervical cancer. Tang obtained federal grants and community support to establish various child and maternal health clinics throughout Maricopa County as chief of the Maricopa County Bureau of Maternal and Child Health. Tang established mobile clinics, including a clinic she called the Maternity Care Bus, to address the lack of access to medical care among rural women in Arizona. She also focused on family planning through education and the distribution of contraception. Tang's efforts in Maricopa Country increased the delivery of maternal, child, and family planning care and helped lower Arizona's infant mortality rate.

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