Helen Taussig was a pioneer in founding the subject of paediatric cardiology.

Helen Brooke Taussig was born on May 24, 1898 in Cambridge, MA. Her father was an economist at Harvard and her mother had been a student at Radcliffe. In early childhood she contracted a bad case of whooping cough which caused increasing deafness and also a certain degree of dyslexia. This caused her a lot of difficulty in her studies but her tenacity to learn made her a good student, her father helping her considerably.

She was a student at Harvard (which didn’t allow lady students!) by special allowance to attend classes but she couldn’t graduate from there. Hence, she graduated from John Hopkins, earning her MD in 1927. In 1930 she was appointed Physician-in-Charge and it was there that she spent the rest of her career.

Due to her increasing deafness she could barely use the stethoscope and hence, relied mainly on her sense of touch to feel the vibrations of normal and abnormal hearts. She also learnt lip-reading.

She became very interested in paediatric cardiology, especially cyanotic hearts. In 1941 Alfred Blalock joined John Hopkins. Taussig discussed the possibility of improving the pulmonary circulation in Fallot’s Tetralogy and they ultimately evolved the Blalock-Taussig operation. In this they were helped by Vivien Thomas, a surgical technician.

This was first performed on 9th November 1944 on a severely ill and cyanotic child. On completion, the child improved remarkably. However, he died after a few months after a second operation. However, they persevered and ultimately this operation was used successfully all over the world.

They published their work in the “Journal of the American Medical Association” and it was hailed as a milestone in medical history, attracting hordes of surgeons to John Hopkins to learn the procedure.

While travelling in Europe she noticed the congenital birth defects in children born to mothers who had been prescribed thalidomide during pregnancy. On returning to America she campaigned for banning its use and was successful in doing so.

In 1947 she published, “Congenital Malformations of the Heart”.

In 1959 she was appointed professor of paediatrics at John Hopkins retiring from there in 1963.

In appreciation of her work she had been given many awards, among them the Albert Lasker award, the Medal of Freedom in 1964 (at the hands of President Johnson). She also had the honour of being the first female president of the American Heart Association. The John Hopkins University named the “Helen B. Taussig Children’s Paediatric Cardiac Centre” in her honour.

Recently, in 2005 the John Hopkins School of Medicine named a medical college in her name.

On May 20, 1986, just four days before her 88th birthday she died in a car accident while driving.

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