

Pearl Mao Tang (1922-)

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 met 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 Carlos Indian Reservation in San Carlos, Arizona. During her month of work, Tang noticed the condition of the fifty-bed hospital. She described the hospital as understaffed and lacking basic items such as needles or blood plasma. Tang purchased a ticket for Japan and visited her husband for about a month. When her husband was sent to Korea, Tang traveled to stay with her parents in Hong Kong until 1952, when both she and her husband returned to Phoenix.

Tang continued with her efforts in public health work upon her return to Phoenix. In 1954, Lucy Sikorsky requested Tang's assistance with developing an immunization program for Maricopa County school children. Sikorsky had worked alongside Tang at the San Carlos Hospital and had been appointed the director of the Maricopa County Health Department. Tang agreed to a part-time job for six months. In an interview, Tang described the differences she saw between schools in rich and poor neighborhoods. She said she was shocked by how many resources some schools lacked.

After a year, Tang began to work alongside nurses in the county's pediatric clinics. She interacted with women working on farms in rural areas and noticed that these women did not have information about maintaining sanitary conditions, which led to their children becoming sick. To better communicate with her patients, Tang took Spanish classes at Phoenix Valley High School at night in Phoenix. In an interview, Tang connected the lack of resources and education to the high infant mortality rate in Arizona at the time. She remembered how Sikorsky congratulated her for contributing to the decrease in infant mortality rates and infant diarrheal diseases after her work with the pediatric clinics, and for educating rural mothers about hygiene and milk sterilization techniques. During these years, the Maricopa County Health Department increased the number of child health clinics.

According to Tang, her experiences with child health influenced her interest in prenatal care and maternity clinics. Tang correlated higher infant deaths with increased occurrences of premature births, and she claimed that focusing on maternal health and educating women early in their pregnancies could decrease that trend. To accomplish that, Tang established mobile clinics that could be set up in areas where women had limited resources. Tang stated that she was shocked by the condition of prenatal facilities, such as when she saw an examination table propped up on one corner by a chair. Tang gained support by determining where maternity clinics were needed and by urging the Maricopa County Health Department to purchase new equipment. Tang also enlisted various women's groups, such as the American Legion Auxiliaries and women's clubs of various cities, which allowed clinics to be set up in their halls, as the County did not provide adequate funding to build permanent facilities. According to Tang, women from those organizations became more tolerant and willing to help less fortunate women from rural communities.

Unable to get pregnant, Tang stated that she and her husband decided to adopt children from China. They adopted a girl in 1957 and a boy in 1958. According to Tang, she faced the challenge of raising her children while working long hours. In 1960, Tang became the chief of the Maricopa County Bureau of Maternal and Child Health. That role provided her with more opportunities to apply for grants and funding. Her first two clinics were in Phoenix, but eventually, with funds from the US Office of Economic Opportunity, a federal agency headquartered in Washington, D.C., that aimed to reduce poverty, and other sources, Tang helped establish more clinics throughout Maricopa County. Using federal funds, Tang established the First Avenue Clinic in south Phoenix. That clinic focused on pediatric medical and dental care for impoverished children. Tang reported in an interview that she provided preventative pediatric care, and that fewer children than before were hospitalized.

Tang received funds for many of her programs from the US federal government. She began to improve maternal health through preventative medicine. In 1962, she noticed that the high rates of cervical cancer were due to late detection, and she developed a program to provide pap smears for women. She called this program the Cervical Cancer Project. Also during that time Tang helped lead a program called Head Start, which focused on health services for children such as immunizations and dental care. Head Start received the National Association of Counties Award for its impact in the community. In addition, Tang noted a need for day care for the children of working women receiving welfare. Through speaking at conferences and arguing for its necessity, Tang influenced Head Start to establish a day care program for working mothers from low-income neighborhoods.

In the late 1960s, Tang began to organize maternal care for pregnant teenagers, which she later said began her interest in teaching women about family planning. Tang applied for the Family Planning Project Grant under Title X of the US Public Health Services Act, a federal grant program. She received funds to build a mobile clinic bus that could be driven to various locations and parked near a community building. She called the clinic the Maternity Care Bus because of its focus on both obstetric care and family planning. Tang recruited physicians to travel on the bus to provide prenatal and postnatal care and to distribute birth control. According to Tang, she did not want to offend women who were against birth control by advertising it as a family planning bus.

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.

As of July 2017, Tang resides in Paradise Valley, Arizona.

Sources

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