

Forty years of healing



Photo by Patrick Sullivan

Doctor Marion Hayes began serving students in 1931 in the center in 1942. She and husband Fred Miller continued at the University's health center, and married the director of the center until retirement in 1971.

Marion Hayes Miller gave the students her best

By SALLY HODGKINSON
Of the Emerald

In the 53 years since Wilma Osburn became the first woman doctor to practice at the University in 1925, the Student Health Center has never been without a woman doctor.

"It's unusual," says Snell Prince, chief administrator for the health center. "Back in those days there just weren't that many female physicians."

But Marion Hayes Miller, who was a doctor in the health center from 1931 until her retirement in 1971, disagrees.

"After all the student body is half made up of women. There's always been a place for a woman in the student health center," she says.

Throughout medical school and her 40 years as a doctor at the health center, Miller says she never experienced discrimination because of her sex.

But other women probably felt discrimination, she says.

"I have a feeling that they had a chip on their shoulders," she says. "They expected to be discriminated against. If I had been looking for it and had a chip on my shoulder, maybe I would have found it. I was just too busy."

A few male classmates objected to women in medical school, she claims. One complained to the dean of students who then asked Miller if she wanted to protest the student's attitude and have him expelled from the school. She declined, saying it was unfair to the student because he was already in his third year

of medical school.

During the last few years, the proportion of medical students and doctors who are women has risen dramatically, according to the American Medical Association.

In 1971, 11.3 percent of first-year medical school students were women. In 1975, this increased to 25 percent and 1978 figures show another increase to 36 percent.

Of the 475 students currently enrolled in the University's medical school in Portland, 108 are women. The University Office of Student Services reports that of 550 "pre-med" students on campus, 31 percent are women.

Miller's interest in medicine grew following her mother's death when Miller was nine years old. "They didn't know why she died," she explains.

Miller came to the University health center in 1931 to fill in for a doctor who was on a year's leave of absence. The doctor never returned and Miller was asked to stay.

The health center then was entirely different than it is now, Miller says. Sacred Heart General Hospital would only accept surgery cases, so the center had to deal with "everything else." University doctors even made house calls around campus until WWII drastically reduced staff.

Miller says she became interested in counseling as students began seeking her advice as well as her medical skills.

"I got more and more interested in helping students find their identity," she

says. "College is the time when young people are deciding which direction to go."

Miller says the lack of "miracle drugs" — such as penicillin — made medicine, before the war, an "entirely different ballgame." Diseases that are no longer a threat today, including polio and tuberculosis, were often fatal problems, she says.

But some things never change. Miller says the center's "number one" health problem was the common cold. She also treated many cases of venereal disease.

"I don't think it was as much of a problem in the early years as it is now with more sexual freedom," she says.

Miller says that throughout her years at the health center, she never had a male patient complain and ask to see a male doctor.

To test the acceptance of woman doctors she once, in the early 1940s, sent a letter to the British Medical Corps inquiring if they would consider a woman doctor in answer to their plea for help. A few months later she received her orders to report to duty, but her work at the health center prevented her from serving.

Miller married the director of the center, Fred Miller, in 1942. She ran into legal and financial problems when she tried to change her surname from Hayes to Miller, so she continued practicing under the former.

During the war, the couple lived in a penthouse above the student health center and a few students disapproved of the apparent hanky-panky going on

between Drs. Hayes and Miller.

When her step-son became engaged, a member of the bride-to-be's sorority commented that she thought it was "disgusting the way Dr. Hayes and Dr. Miller carried on." To prevent further misunderstanding, Marion Hayes Miller was the name used from then on.

"I don't think there was quite the tolerance for 'shacking up' then as there is now," laughs Fred Miller.

Many interesting cases came to the Millers during their combined 76 years at the health center. Once the doctors had to treat a group of students for poison oak because, on their fraternity-sorority picnic, they had used poison oak branches to toast the hot dogs.

The Millers say they enjoyed their years at the health center for a very simple reason — the students.

"They're the best people to work with," Fred Miller says. "They would get well in spite of us."

In recognition of their years of service at the health center, Prince recommended that the University name the health center after the Millers.

But Prince says a rule prohibits naming a building after living persons.

"They're afraid someone might go crazy and disgrace the University," he says.

So instead, the health center dedicated their out-patient service to the Millers last fall. Upon their deaths, the center will be named the Miller Health Center.