

Hannah Peters plays vital role as doctor to the Rosies

By Ginny McPartland, Heritage writer

Shipyard physician achieves brilliant postwar career as international reproductive biology expert



Hannah Peters, women's health physician in Kaiser Richmond World War II Shipyards.
Photo courtesy of Susan and Tom Peters

Before 1943, nobody knew how well women shipyard workers would adapt to the grit and

physicality of a man's world of heavy industry. In the midst of World War II, physician Hannah Peters tackled the job of unraveling that mystery without a play book.

She cared for female workers that poured into the Kaiser Richmond Shipyards. These women were pioneers, recruited to industry for the first time due to the war emergency.

Peters, German-born and trained in New York, had migrated to California in 1940 and set up an office in East Oakland. She found herself struggling to make ends meet and realized she needed to find a way to connect with patients who needed her.

When the United States entered the war in late 1941, Peters heard about Sidney Garfield, MD, who was developing a medical care program for Henry Kaiser's shipyard workers in Richmond, Calif. She decided to leave private practice and join the staff of the Permanente Health Plan.

She quickly learned that the needs of women workers were abundant. They came from the South, the Midwest and the East Coast, and many had never seen a physician.

"I joined the medical department but it soon became clear to me that a gynecological department was necessary to take care of the special problems of the 23,000 women working in the yards," Peters wrote in her memoir years later.

"A trained gynecologist was added to the staff and we established special programs to deal with the question of abnormal menstruation, pregnancy, venereal disease, sexual problems and to provide contraceptive services," Peters wrote.



Kaiser Richmond Shipyard workers take special training to build their strength and stamina and adjust to heavy industrial work. Kaiser Permanente photo

In seeing her patients, Peters noted many complaints about excessive menstrual bleeding that began when they started doing heavy work. Peters deduced that with a change in diet, to incorporate more carbohydrates for work energy, the women were worsening an already existing Vitamin B deficiency. She found shots of Vitamin B-complex solved the problem in most cases.

Peters also noticed that women lacked the stamina and strength to comfortably do their jobs. She arranged an activity program that had the Rosies (the term used to describe women war workers) climbing ladders and performing other tasks meant to strengthen their bodies to better handle their jobs.

A believer in prenatal care and cancer prevention screening, Peters encouraged women to seek care often. She also urged women to come to the clinic to have pelvic and breast examinations every six months to screen for cancer of the ovaries, cervix, uterus and breast.

"In this way (conducting frequent physical examinations) we have demonstrated that extremely early cancer of the cervix can be consistently detected and not stumbled upon accidentally," Peters and colleague Wilson Footer, MD, wrote in their article "Gynecology in Industry," published in the Permanente Foundation Medical Bulletin and elsewhere in 1945.

The physicians also distributed materials to educate workers on how to avoid venereal disease and unwanted pregnancy. In their study, Peters and Footer also looked at the question of whether women should continue to work after they become pregnant.

In reviewing many cases of miscarriage among yard workers over a two-year period, they concluded that none of the terminations could be blamed on the work.

"(Later in the war) another obstetrician (Dr. Robert W. King, a prince of a fellow) joined our group. He taught me obstetrics and gynecological surgery. . . I learned a great deal during the three years I was at Permanente . . . the years working with the shipyard women gave me experiences I could not have gotten in a life-time of private practice.

"The work with so many women of different backgrounds and coming from different cultures opened a new field for me: office gynecology," she wrote.



Dr. Peters in her office at the Laboratory of Reproductive Biology in Copenhagen, Denmark, 1979. Photo courtesy of Susan and Tom Peters

After the war, Peters continued her work in women's health, including family planning in India and elsewhere. She distinguished herself over the decades as a prolific publisher of research about reproductive biology and cancer.

She founded the Laboratory of Reproductive Health in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1959 and headed the lab until her retirement in 1980. Hannah Peters passed away in 2009 at the age of 97.