

CCP Spotlight

The American Board of Cardiovascular Perfusion



MaryAnn Overton, CCP Emeritus

By Caleb Varner, CCP

I had the privilege of speaking with MaryAnn Overton about her life and career in healthcare. MaryAnn has left a lasting impression on the perfusion community since she first became certified by the ABCP in 1977; however, it was well before this that her passion for helping others emerged.

From a young age, MaryAnn knew she would enter the healthcare field. While in grade school, her mother said if she became a nurse, she'd always have work. With this in mind, she never looked back and continued towards that goal. MaryAnn was born during World War II on a military base in Grass Valley, California where her father was a dentist in the US Army Medical Corps. After the war, her family moved to Port Washington, Wisconsin, a small town near where her father grew up and planned to open his dental practice. Just one cornfield away from Lake

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Michigan, southeastern Wisconsin became home for MaryAnn through her childhood and early professional career. As the third oldest of eleven children, she said she grew up learning the value of working hard for what you want. This was exemplified when she worked in the diet kitchen of Port Washington Hospital, earning her tuition for Catholic high school. This type of hard work and determination stuck with her throughout her entire career.

Using some of the money she saved while working in the diet kitchen, MaryAnn embarked on her healthcare career by attending nursing school at St. Mary's on the Lake in Milwaukee. After graduation, she moved back to Port Washington Hospital for a year, where she was offered jobs in either the nursery or the operating room. Having come from such a large family, she said she spent enough time with babies and took the job in the operating room! This experience set her up well as she transitioned to the operating room at the VA in Milwaukee where she worked for five years. This is where she saw open heart surgery for the first time, and like many who visit the operating room today, she wondered what those two perfusionists were doing behind the heart-lung machine! MaryAnn's intelligence and work ethic helped to make a name for herself while working at the VA. The doctors she worked alongside were so impressed they urged her to pursue medical school.

MaryAnn began to look for medical schools associated with hospitals so she could continue to work as an operating room nurse while going to school. Through her research, she found Stanford Hospital and Medical School, so she picked up her life and moved to California to be nearby. She found work in the Stanford operating room to support herself through a pre-med degree that would allow her to apply to medical school. Her supervisor loved seeing that nurses were pursuing higher education and was flexible with her schedule allowing MaryAnn to work weekends and nights while attending college full-time.

After completing her prerequisites, she applied to Stanford Medical School with enthusiastic references from two doctors she had worked with in the operating room. Those two doctors were Dr. Fogarty, a fellow at the time and later inventor of the Fogarty catheter, and Dr. Shumway who performed the first human-to-human heart transplant in the United States. With her extensive background and glowing recommendations, MaryAnn was accepted! However, before she had a chance to enroll, her supervisor from the Stanford operating room came to her with a proposition. She wanted MaryAnn to go to perfusion school to prove to the doctors that women were just as smart as men and could run the heart-lung machine. MaryAnn had seen perfusionists but still wasn't sure what they did on a day-to-day basis and while she had planned to become a cardiac surgeon she was intrigued. When her supervisor offered to continue paying her nursing salary while in school, she decided to enroll in Stanford's program to learn all about perfusion.

During perfusion school, MaryAnn spent night and day in the cardiac operating room where she learned the ins and outs of the profession. She started her training on disc oxygenators and remembered the extensive cleaning process that would take hours. Each disc would be scrubbed with soapy water, then sodium hydroxide, and lastly wiped down with alcohol before being rinsed and dried for the next case. While in school she had the

opportunity to learn from great innovators such as Dr. Stofer who held degrees in both engineering and veterinary medicine. He led the perfusion program and taught classes as well as applied his knowledge in Dr. Shumway's animal labs where he developed and perfected perfusion techniques before using them in the operating room.

After graduating from perfusion school, MaryAnn stayed at Stanford for eight years and worked her way up to the lead perfusionist. In this role, she became well-known throughout the hospital for being the go-to person and assisting many different departments. After leaving Stanford, she continued to work in hospitals around the San Francisco Bay area before joining Pacific Life Lines and landing at El Camino Hospital, a program she had been covering previously. Before this move, she remembered the challenges of working and having a family. After having her first child, she was only able to stay in the hospital for 24 hours after giving birth and take four weeks of maternity leave!

During our conversation, MaryAnn shared how things have changed over her career and what different technologies she adopted. From learning on and starting with disc oxygenators, she next saw bubble, followed by membrane, and lastly hollow fiber oxygenators. Her first and favorite pump was the always reliable Pempco heart-lung machine! MaryAnn shared that these first pumps came with no safety alarms like bubble or level detectors and how careful you needed to be to make sure you never emptied your reservoir. Additional changes she saw came in the forms of electronic charting, point-of-care lab testing, and microplegia with Quest. All things that seemed impossible at the beginning of her career.

MaryAnn also made contributions to the perfusion field as a whole. She spoke at different conferences discussing the current state of perfusion and served as an oral exam proctor for the American Board of Cardiovascular Perfusion for 10 years. Towards the end of her time with the oral exams, she was selected to sit in on other proctors to ensure that they were being fair and consistent between each examinee. An important role no doubt! Interestingly, one of the examiners she had to observe was Dr. Stofer, the man who taught her perfusion. How the tables had turned!

At the end of 2023, MaryAnn transitioned to CCP Emeritus and is looking forward to spending time with her family. Ever dedicated to the field and her teams, she still plans to work occasionally, helping to maintain the quality controls on the various devices throughout her organization. Her continued presence will be greatly appreciated by those around her and I feel fortunate to be the one sharing her story with the greater CCP community! MaryAnn's dedication to the profession and helping others has not gone unnoticed and I thank her for all she has done to push perfusion forward.