



Foundations of Pediatrics

Lula Olga Lubchenco, MD (1915–2001);

Scientist, Teacher, Mentor/Mother to Many

Patricia J. McFeeley, MD

Department of Pathology, Office of the Medical Investigator, University of New Mexico School of Medicine, MSC09 5040, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA

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Lula Olga Lubchenco (Fig. 1) was born in Turkistan, Russia, in 1915. Her mother, an American doctor, had married a Russian agronomist whom she had met when he was in South Carolina studying cotton growing. Lula was the second of what eventually would be 5 children. She was, ironically, premature, (or maybe small for gestational age, she would later ponder). In 1917, the family fled war-torn Russia, escaping across Siberia to China, crossing the Pacific to San Francisco, and eventually arriving back at the family home and farm in South Carolina. In 1930, with the depression looming and the boll weevil destroying their cotton crop, the Lubchencos moved to north-east Colorado. Lula was 15 years old.

Following high school, Lula attended Denver University on a scholarship and graduated from University of Colorado School of Medicine in 1939. She did a rotating internship at Colorado General Hospital and then began her pediatric training at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, New York; a position she had accepted and began before her decision to marry Carl Josephson, a Denver internist. She continued to use her maiden name professionally because at that time married women (or men) were not desirable candidates. Between 1941 and 1945 she returned to Denver Children's Hospital for her pediatric residency, a research fellowship, and a year in private practice. Her first publications were on polio and vitamin A absorption while she was a fellow with Dr Harold Palmer [1,2]. She became an associate in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado Medical Center in 1943 and moved through the academic ranks becoming Professor in 1969.

E-mail address: patricia.mcfeeley@gmail.com



Fig. 1. Dr Lula Lubchenco.

When Colorado General Hospital under the direction of Drs Harry Gordon, Chair of Pediatrics, and E. Stewart Taylor, Chair of Obstetrics, established the Premature Infant Center in 1947, she became its first Medical Director. Lula said it was supposed to be a temporary position until they could find someone more suitable. She served as the director/codirector until her official retirement 30 years later. During the early years of the center she and Dr Taylor began the collaborative process of training pediatric and obstetrics residents together in neonatal resuscitation. Lula also recognized that, in order to ensure a good pregnancy outcome, prenatal care needed to encompass more than medical care, and she advocated for including social workers, nutritionists, and visiting nurses in the care of pregnant women. She published 2 prophetic articles: “Joint Responsibilities of Obstetrician and Pediatrician” in 1950 [3] and “Care of the Premature Infant” in 1951 [4]. Her research interests were always motivated by the challenges she met as a clinician.

Additional changes in care included advocating for transporting high-risk mothers to regional health care centers before delivery, suggesting that the mother was the best incubator for as long as possible for these tiny infants. She was also a staunch advocate for on-demand feeding, breast-feeding, and the associated rooming-in (in which a baby remains in the mother’s room

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