



Inspirational Women in Surgery: Professor Angelita Habr-Gama, MD, PhD, Colorectal Surgeon, Brazil

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Professor Angelita Habr-Gama was born in the Marajo Island, Brazil, to Lebanese immigrant parents. Her family moved to São Paulo after the death of her brother from complications of acute appendicitis when she was 7 years old. While her parents wanted her to be a teacher, the young Professor Habr-Gama was determined to be a doctor. She studied hard and gained entry into the prestigious University of São Paulo School of Medicine (FMUSP). It was here that she met Professors Alipio Correa Netto and Arrigo Raia whom she considers her influencers and mentors.

In her sixth year of medical school, while assisting in an operation, she remembers the Chief Resident asking her to suture the abdominal wall under his supervision. His words of encouragement about her natural dexterity led to her applying for residency into the surgical program. Despite the negativity of the selection committee in trying to convince her to apply in internal medicine, stating that surgery was a field for men, she remained undeterred. She passed the entrance examination securing the top score and first place out of eight for general surgical residency.

Professor Habr-Gama was inspired by the presentations from surgeons from the famous St Mark's Hospital,

London, at the X International Congress of Coloproctology held in São Paulo in 1960 and applied to be a fellow there.

However, they turned her down because she was a woman. Nonetheless, Dr. Habr-Gama was persistent and reapplied again, until she became the first female fellow at the St Mark's Hospital. She regards this opportunity as the turning point in her professional life and career. After completion of her fellowship, she returned to Brazil to join the Gastrointestinal Department, Hospital das Clinicas, FMUSP, where she worked alongside her former mentors, Professors Correa Netto and Raia. In 1964, she married Dr. Joaquim Jose Gama Rodrigues, who was a Professor of Surgery at the University. In 1994, she established and became the first Chief of the Colorectal Unit, and subsequently, in 1999, she became the Chief of the Department of Surgery.

Professor Habr-Gama (Fig. 1) has been a pioneer in colorectal surgery with numerous accomplishments, including the introduction of colonoscopy in Brazil, founding the Brazilian Association for Colorectal Cancer Prevention (ABRAPRECI) in 2004, creation of the Giant Colon to educate the lay public about colorectal diseases, and the collaborative organization of the first International Forum in Rectal Cancer, the "FICARE" in 2007. However, her most significant contribution to the field of rectal cancer management has been the introduction of the "Wait-and-watch" policy for patients treated with neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy who experience complete tumor response. This paradigm shift in rectal cancer management has been pioneered by her based on numerous clinical observations since 1991 of identifying pathological full responses in resected specimens. Initially, this approach was not widely accepted, despite her landmark publication on the subject in the *Annals of Surgery* in 2004 [1]. Today, colorectal surgeons are more likely to embrace this philosophy and acknowledge its contribution to significantly reducing the number of radical

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Fig. 1 Professor Angelita Habr-Gama

operations and their associated risks of sexual, anal, or urinary dysfunction, and the risk of permanent stoma creation.

Professor Habr-Gama's message to the next generation of surgeons is one of vibrance and perseverance. "Success in any profession depends on dedication and effort. Knowledge is fundamental. Love, and enjoy, your work. See the world and try to observe other colleagues and how they work. Take care of your mental and physical health. Dance. Practice sports. Relax. Have a hobby. Particularly for the women surgeons, all of this holds true, but even today, you will have to study and work harder, participate intensively, and never accept 'No' for an answer" [2].

References

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