

Department of Medicine Inclusion Council Celebrates Black History Month Honoring Black Physicians

Helen Octavia Dickens, MD

The Department of Medicine Inclusion Council honors and celebrates the life of Dr. Helen Octavia Dickens, M.D. (February 21, 1909-December 2, 2001). In 1932, she entered the University of Illinois College of Medicine, where she was one of five women in a class of 137 medical students. In 1934 Dickens received her medical degree and was one of two women and the sole African American woman to graduate in her class (Class photo right). In 1945 she became the first female African-American to become board certified in obstetrics and gynecology in Philadelphia; five years later she became the first African-American woman admitted as a fellow of the American College of Surgeons.



From the Collections of the University of Pennsylvania Archives.

By 1956 she had become the first such woman to join the staff and faculty of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine. Over the next two decades, she rose through the ranks and was appointed director of the OB/GYN Department at Mercy Douglass Hospital in Philadelphia and full professor, followed by professor emeritus, at UPenn. In 1967, she founded the Teen Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania for school-age mothers in the inner city, one of the country's first teen pregnancy clinics. From 1967 to 1985 she was director of the School of Medicine's Teen Clinic in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. In 1999, The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP) named The Helen O. Dickens Center for Women's Health for Dickens, honoring her for fifty years "dedicated to healing, helping, and guiding all women."



Dr. Dickens was appointed associate dean of Minority Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in 1969, becoming the first such titleholder in the nation.

