In Memoriam: Winifred M. Ashby
1879–1975

D R. WINIFRED MAYER ASHBY, the first person to measure accurately the life span of erythrocytes, died July 19, 1975, at the age of 95, following a cerebrovascular accident.

Winifred Ashby was born in London, England, in 1879. At age 14, she moved with her family to Chicago, Ill. She attended Northwestern University and the University of Chicago, receiving a B.S. degree from the latter in 1903, and Washington University, St. Louis, Mo., where she received an M.S. degree in 1905. She spent a few years in the Philippine Islands, studying problems of malnutrition. Upon returning to the United States, she taught physics and chemistry in the high schools of Berwyn, Ill. and Maryville, Mo. From 1914 to 1916 she worked in laboratories at Rush Medical College and Illinois Central Hospital in Chicago. She began a Mayo Clinic fellowship in immunology and pathology in February 1917. At that time, it was widely believed that the life span of the erythrocyte was, at most, two to three weeks. Winifred Ashby undertook a study of erythrocyte survival, and devised a serologic technique for accurately measuring erythrocyte survival. She concluded that human red cells may remain in the circulation for as long as 110 days. Although Dr. Rafael Isaacs and others contested her observations for several years, in the end, Ashby’s observations were fully vindicated. Results of erythrocyte survival studies with the “Ashby method” remain a milestone in the development of our knowledge of erythrocyte physiology.

Winifred Ashby received the Ph.D. degree from the University of Minnesota on July 1, 1921. She was a member of the Mayo Clinic staff until 1924, when she accepted an appointment at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C. She never returned to Rochester, and for 47 years there was almost no communication. At St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, she supervised serology and bacteriology laboratories until her retirement in 1949. During those 28 years, she published several studies concerning the standardization and relative sensitivity of serologic tests for syphilis. She also contributed many studies of the carbonic anhydrase activity of the central nervous system.

In 1971, I began a correspondence with Dr. Ashby. She was very gratified to learn that the pioneering work she had done on erythrocyte survival 54 years before had not been forgotten. In one of her letters she wrote:

“Your thoughtful kindness in remembering my ninety-third birthday has given an old woman a great deal of pleasure.

As the end of the road looms ahead, one tends to dwell on the stupidities and failures but your letter will always remind me that living has been a great adventure for me, for which I am grateful—especially to the Mayo Foundation.”
In the fall of 1973, I had the pleasure of visiting with her at her cottage in Lorton, Va. She was then working on a manuscript concerning a hypothesis of the cause of the sudden infant death syndrome. At the age of 94, she seemed remarkably alert and in good health. She retained a lively interest in the mechanisms of human disease and hoped yet to contribute to their control.

Besides her accomplishments in medicine and laboratory science, Winifred Ashby was a gifted musician. During the few weeks of her final illness, she took much pleasure from listening to recorded performances of her own piano compositions.

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