

North Nursing Network

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Dr. Ralph Rossen

Ralph Rossen was born in Hibbing, Minnesota, on November 15, 1909, to immigrant parents. His father, a grocer and his mother, a homemaker, raised a family of four children. Rossen graduated Hibbing High School and Junior College, where he wrestled and was a member of the state championship football team. He was then admitted to the University of Minnesota Medical School, where he became an all-University heavyweight wrestling champion. He worked his way through school as a mail carrier during vacation periods, and graduated in 1934, the same year he married Beatrice Cohen.

He first interned in Pediatrics, but when children died in his arms during a polio epidemic, he switched to Neurology and basic research in hopes of finding a polio prevention or cure. During his Neurology residency, he moonlighted as a family practitioner in Afton, Minnesota. In 1936, he became Assistant Superintendent of the St. Peter State Hospital, and in 1938, he became Superintendent of the State Hospital in Hastings, Minnesota.

He was horrified at conditions facing the mentally ill, and from the time he took over the hospital, he made major changes. He pioneered taking patients out of restraints, insisted on one diet for patients and employees alike so that patients did not get mush while employees ate meat, (with the help of the staff they lobbied the legislature and all got meat!), believed that each patient needed a "Major Prescription" for his/her needs — thus pioneering individualized care within the state hospital setting.

Although he was declared essential to the State of Minnesota during World War II, he insisted on enlisting in the service. Turned down by the Army because he wore glasses to read, he fought to get into the Navy and succeeded in 1943. He was first stationed at N.I.H. in Bethesda, Maryland, where he became one of the country's first electroencephalographers; served at Camp Perry in Richmond, Virginia; and then at the Naval Hospital at Portsmouth, Virginia, until 1946.

At the war's end, he returned to his beloved hospital in Hastings, where he knew the name of each of his 1100 patients and their visiting family members. He also continued to fight for improved conditions and the rights



Ralph Rossen, MD

of the mentally ill in Minnesota and throughout the country. In 1949, Governor Luther Youngdahl drafted Dr. Rossen as Minnesota's first Mental Health Commissioner. In that capacity, he continued to bring the plight of the mentally ill to the attention of the state and the nation. In 1951, at the insistence of Mayo Clinic physicians concerned about his high blood pressure, he resigned that position and returned to Hastings. He worked to finish his manuscript, *One Mentally Ill Patient*, which documented the "Major Prescription" he advocated for each patient, and also continued the polio research he had been involved in since the 1930s. In 1955, at age 44, he suffered

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a near fatal MI, and was told by University of Minnesota heart specialists that returning to his 20 hour days at Hastings would likely result in his death within the year.

With great sadness he agreed to resign from Hastings. He accepted a position as Director of the L. E. Phillips Psychobiological Research Foundation at Mount Sinai Hospital in Minneapolis, where he became an early investigator into the relationship between stress and MI, and into the mysteries of the mind which we now call Alzheimer's. In 1957, he began working in electroencephalography at North Memorial Hospital, ultimately creating the Sleep and Dream Laboratory, which he directed. Toward the end of his life, he pioneered telephonic EEGs at North Memorial.

Although he lived for twenty years after his infarct, he sustained massive heart damage and had frequent tachycardia episodes, and in the last years, episodes of

congestive heart failure as well. He died on June 26, 1974.

Ralph Rossen, MD, was board certified in five specialties: Neurology, Psychiatry, Electroencephalography, Hospital Administration and Cardiology. He was a humanitarian who bettered the lives of thousands of mentally ill patients. He was known by all of his colleagues for his diagnostic abilities — he was a doctor's doctor — and his dedication to bedside care of the patient. His publications number in the hundreds — referred medical journal articles, conference papers, and monographs of the L. E. Phillips Research Foundation. He deplored fee-for-service medicine — often refusing payment when he saw private patients who had little or no money, and suggesting that patients who could pay donate to medical research rather than pay him. *(See related article on page 7.)*

Arlene Rossen Cardozo
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