

## This Day in History... November 30, 1900

# Happy Birthday Mary Lasker

Health activist and philanthropist Mary Woodward Lasker was born on November 30, 1900, in Watertown, Wisconsin.

Lasker and her parents suffered from health issues for many years. Her parents had hypertension and she suffered from bad ear infections. The lack of medical treatments for these conditions left Lasker dissatisfied with the state of medicine. This would inspire a lifetime commitment to medical research and drug development.

Lasker attended the University of Wisconsin and Radcliffe College, graduating in 1923 with a degree in art history. She did her postgraduate study at Oxford and then settled in New York City, where she worked in an art gallery. Over the years she built one of the best private art collections in the country. After a brief marriage, Lasker found some success selling affordable fabrics that pictured movie stars.

Mary remarried in 1940 to Albert Lasker, a pioneer in modern advertising. Albert shared Mary's love of art and interest in improving public health. Together the Laskers hoped to make health insurance more easily available to all Americans and to improve overall health by contributing to research on diseases. To aid in their quest, they founded the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation in 1942. The foundation would soon offer the country's top prizes in medical and clinical research and journalism.

The Laskers were strong supporters of President Harry Truman's recommendation for universal health insurance. It faced strong opposition however, so the Laskers focused their efforts on medical research. While Lasker was neither a doctor nor a researcher, her work revolutionized the medical community. Over the years she concentrated on cancer, mental health, heart disease, arthritis, and hypertension.

*Lasker launched her own crusade against cancer.*



Lasker used her social standing, powers of persuasion, and personal wealth to promote the rapid growth of biomedical research. Doctor Jonas Salk, who developed the first effective polio vaccine, called Lasker "a matchmaker between science and society."

Prior to Lasker's advocacy, private universities and pharmaceutical companies typically conducted expensive medical research. Decades could pass before physicians learned the outcome and applied the findings to their patients.

Lasker campaigned for greater cooperation between scientists and the medical community as well as for government funds to finance research. Confronted with opposition, Lasker countered, "If you think research is expensive, try disease."

Lasker's efforts led to an increase in money given to the National Institutes of Health and the establishment of research centers focused on specific diseases, including the National Cancer Institute. Over the years she served as director,

chairman, or trustee of several organizations including the American Cancer Society, the United Cerebral Palsy Research and Education Foundation, and the National Committee for Mental Hygiene.

In addition to medical research, Lasker was also passionate about urban beautification. She supported the planting of trees and flowers in Washington, DC and New York. She also pushed for the installation of lighting and fountains. A pink tulip was named after her in the 1980s.

*Issued for the 100th anniversary of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.*



For her contributions, Lasker received dozens of honorary degrees and awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. She died on February 21, 1994. Upon her death, she left over \$10 million to the Lasker Foundation to continue her life's work.



*Lasker stamp from the Distinguished Americans Series*



*Issued to raise awareness for heart health.*

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