

## **Dr. Paula V. Knaibl**

**A Family Perspective, by Alfredo Pascual, her Grandson.**

### **A Trailblazer in Medicine and Society**

In the male-dominated surgical field of the mid-20th century, Dr. Paula Victoria Knaibl emerged as a transformative figure who not only redefined plastic and reconstructive surgery in Uruguay but also shattered gender barriers in medicine.



### **Early Life and Education**

Born on March 9, 1916, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Czech parents, Dr. Knaibl began her medical studies at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) Faculty of Medicine and, in 1940, transferred to the University of the Republic (Udelar) in Montevideo, Uruguay, where she embraced her new homeland, becoming a naturalized Uruguayan citizen in 1943. Balancing motherhood—she had two children in the mid-1940s—with her studies, she was awarded her Doctor of Medicine and Surgery degree in 1949.

### **Pioneering Role in Plastic Surgery**

Defying societal expectations, Dr. Knaibl specialized in plastic and reconstructive surgery, becoming Uruguay's first female plastic surgeon and the first woman to join the Sociedad de Cirugía del Uruguay.



Her groundbreaking career in a male-dominated field paved the way for future generations of women in surgery. Balancing her rigorous professional life with her family and cultural interests, she was celebrated for her multifaceted contributions and unwavering dedication to her patients and community.

### **International Training and Expertise**

A pivotal British Council scholarship in 1950 launched Dr. Knaibl on the international stage, enabling her to train under leading surgeons in the United Kingdom. At hospitals and clinics across the UK she worked with renowned figures such as Sir Harold D. Gillies, Professor T. Pomfret Kilner, Sir Denis John Browne, Patrick Wensley Clarkson, Alexander Burns Wallace, J. S. Tough, Rainsford Mowlem, Guy Pulvertaft, Sir Archibald H. McIndoe, and others. Her training extended to Vienna, where collaborations with renowned surgeons Lorenz Böhler and Rudolf Ullik further enriched her surgical expertise.

Recognition of her exceptional abilities came swiftly when, on September 27, 1951, she was unanimously elected as an Associate Member of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons (BAPS). Throughout the 1950s, she maintained an active correspondence with her European colleagues. Much of this survives in the family archive, including a photograph of Sir Harold Gillies, signed by him “To my good friend and better surgeon”. She also hosted several colleagues in Uruguay, fostering international medical collaboration.

### **Transforming Uruguayan Healthcare**



Upon returning to Uruguay, Dr. Knaibl founded essential surgical services, including the Plastic Surgery Unit at the Military Hospital and the Pediatric Plastic Surgery Unit at Hospital Pereira Rossell, addressing critical needs in burn care and congenital defect treatment for children. At the Banco de Seguros del Estado Hospital, she treated injured workers, including those with severe hand injuries.

She worked tirelessly to secure government support for these initiatives, advancing both reconstructive surgery and public health in Uruguay.

Her academic contributions earned her international recognition. She authored publications on innovative techniques, including in bone grafting, maxillofacial surgery, the use of atropine during surgery, treatment of Dupuytren's contracture, eyelid and eyebrow reconstruction and pediatric burn care. She presented her findings at various conferences, including the VII Congreso Interamericano de Cirugía in Lima, Peru, solidifying her reputation as a leading voice in the field.

### **Beyond the Scalpel: Advocacy and Societal Influence**

Dr. Knaibl championed safety awareness as chair of the Commission for the Prevention of Accidents in the Home, using regular radio broadcasts to educate the public. Her advocacy extended to unique health challenges, such as injuries in dancers and respiratory issues in singers and wind instrument musicians.

Beyond her medical work, Dr. Knaibl was deeply engaged in social and intellectual causes. In 1957, she petitioned state officials to promote affordable tourism for low-income workers. She corresponded with economist Friedrich August von Hayek, advocating for the translation of his works into Spanish to influence South American politicians. She also organized cultural events and engaged with intellectual and artistic circles in Uruguay.

### **Legacy and Recognition**

Dr. Knaibl's impact on her colleagues and the broader medical community was profound. Upon retiring from her role as a physician at ANCAP's medical service due to illness, she was honored with a heartfelt farewell, a testament to the respect and admiration she commanded.

Tragically, her life was cut short when she passed away at the age of 46 in 1962 during a high-risk surgical procedure in which she was the patient. While her career was brief, her contributions left an indelible mark on medicine and society.

Her legacy endures through numerous honors. In 2011, the Sociedad Uruguaya de Historia de la Medicina celebrated her contributions, and in 2024, the Junta Departamental de Montevideo named a street after her, ensuring her pioneering spirit continues to inspire.

### **A Blueprint for Breaking Barriers**

Dr. Paula V. Knaibl's life exemplifies the power of dedication and innovation. Her contributions to plastic and reconstructive surgery not only transformed medical practices in Uruguay but also opened doors for women in medicine. Her legacy remains a testament to overcoming obstacles, inspiring future generations to push boundaries and redefine possibilities.