



Dr. Charles Drew: First Medical Director of American Red Cross Blood Services

Dr. Charles Drew was uniquely qualified to be the Medical Director of American Red Cross Blood Services. He was a pioneer in the development of the modern techniques of blood collection and plasma processing. And as an African American doctor in a time of legal segregation, he remains a groundbreaking figure in American history.

Birth and Early Life

Dr. Charles Drew was born in 1904 in Washington, DC. A bright scholar-athlete, he received an athletic scholarship to attend Amherst College in Massachusetts. While at Amherst, he joined Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. After graduating in 1926, he worked at Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland as an Instructor of Biology and Chemistry and as Director of Athletics.

Young Doctor

In 1928, Dr. Drew enrolled in McGill University's Medical College in Montreal, Canada. He graduated in 1933 with both Doctor of Medicine (MD) and Master of Surgery (CM) degrees. In 1935, he taught pathology at Howard University's College of Medicine while also working as a surgical resident at Howard University Freedmen's Hospital. An outstanding resident and surgeon, he went on to become the first African American to be appointed an examiner of the American Board of Surgery.

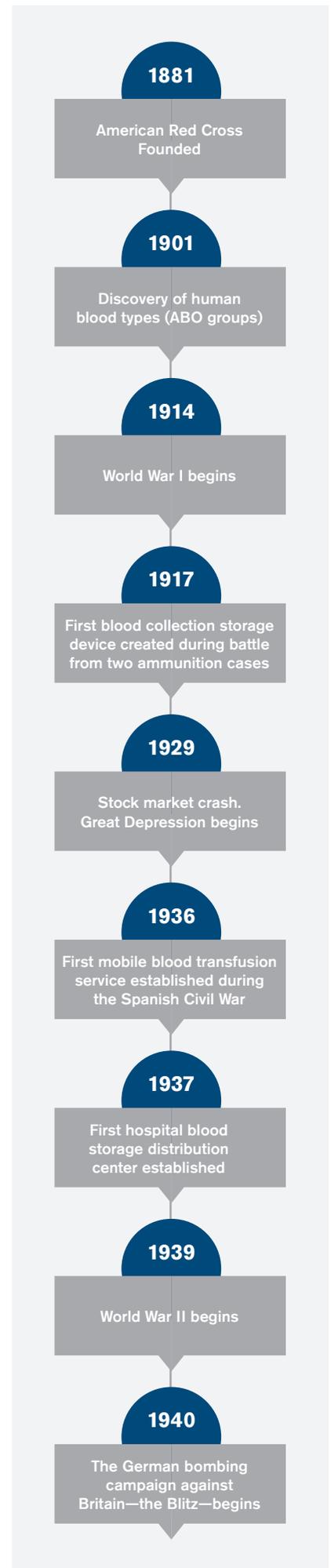


“Excellence of performance will transcend artificial barriers created by man.”

Attributed to Charles Drew by his trainees

Research on Blood Preservation

In 1938 he became a resident of surgery at New York Presbyterian Hospital as well as a General Education Board Fellow in surgery at Columbia University in New York City. There, he studied blood preservation, and developed techniques for preserving plasma, a crucial blood component often given to trauma patients and burn victims.



Dr. Drew's Columbia dissertation had direct implications on the transportation and storage of blood during World War II. Dr. Drew's dissertation included details for establishing the experimental blood bank at the Presbyterian Hospital. He described the processes of drawing blood, typing donors and identifying the indications for transfusion. He compiled both donor and recipient statistics as well as the types of adverse reactions to transfusion. Many of these processes are still in use today.

Called to Action at the American Red Cross

In 1940, the American Red Cross and its partners launched Blood for Britain. They planned to ship large quantities of plasma to England to help heal those wounded during the Blitz. Blood for Britain chose Dr. Drew to lead the project as its medical director.

In January 1941, Dr. Drew was named the first medical director of the American Red Cross Blood Services. He oversaw the first blood drives using bloodmobiles—refrigerated trucks serving as donation centers. The drives were a success, even though it was still quite uncommon for people to give blood for unknown recipients and without compensation. Bloodmobiles are still in use today by the Red Cross and other blood collection organizations for blood drives across the US.



It is often reported that Dr. Drew left the Red Cross over its compliance with US Army policy to segregate blood donations. However, the segregation policy was not implemented for some time after Dr. Drew left the Red Cross in April of 1941. As late as August 1941, Red Cross rules were in place to accept blood from people of all races. Later that year the Red Cross gave in to the demands of the strictly segregated US Army. The Army first refused, and then segregated, blood donations from African American donors. An official statement on Dr. Drew's rationale for leaving was never made. The Red Cross ended its policy on blood segregation in 1950.

“There must always be the continuing struggle to make the increasing knowledge of the world bear some fruit in increased understanding and in the production of human happiness.”

Charles Drew, inscription on his headstone

Later Life and Death

After Dr. Drew left the Red Cross in April 1941, he joined Howard University as chair of their Department of Surgery and as Chief Surgeon at Howard University Freedmen's Hospital. Dr. Drew received numerous awards for his research and contributions to medical education. In recognition of his work with plasma, he was awarded the Spingarn Medal in 1944 by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The Spingarn Medal is the NAACP's highest honor given to an individual of African descent and American citizenship, who has made a significant contribution in any field. As Dr. Drew had envisioned, one of his greatest achievements was that he taught more than half of the African American surgeons receiving certification from the American Board of Surgery between 1941 and 1950.

In 1950, Dr. Drew and three other physicians were traveling to an annual medical conference at the John A. Andrew Hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama when they were involved in a terrible car accident. Dr. Drew died just a few months shy of his 46th birthday. His leadership in blood banking, the American Red Cross, and the larger medical community and country was legendary and remains a shining example for others. It is impossible to count the extraordinary number of lives saved because of techniques Dr. Drew developed, but a grateful nation cherishes his memory.