Colebrook's Contribution to the Pap Test

This article was written in May, 2000, so please do some mental adjustment with the dates.RLG

Yet another milestone has been reached in our young century. It has been 50 years since the Pap Smear, so called was discovered, thus saving untold numbers of lives around the world.

What jogged my memory on this was an item on radio the other day observing that this is the 40th anniversary of the invention of "the pill". That also has caused a revolution in human society, but to the best of my knowledge, has no local connections. This is not the case with the Pap test.

Dr. George Papanicolaou perfected a test for ovarian cancer while doing research at Cornell Medical Center in New York City in 1950. The discovery was but the first step in implementing the procedure; an army of technicians would have to be trained to take the physician's results, make them into slides, interpret those slides and forward the results to the physician.

Grace Grigg, a Colebrook resident from 1930 until her death in 1979, had done research in molecular biology at Johns Hopkins University as a graduate student. Our family physician, Dr. Aaron Levy of Winsted, knew of the work being pioneered by Dr. Papanicolaou, and also knew Mrs. Grigg's background. Arrangements were made for her to go to New York and study under "Dr. Pap". The work there was done in a laboratory; consequently the numbers of technicians were very small. For slightly more than a year, all tests for ovarian and cervical cancer in the State of Connecticut were done by two women; Grace Grigg and a nurse associated with the Hartford Hospital.

The Grigg dining room was converted into a laboratory. The volume of test materials increased weekly, as more and more doctors began making the tests. She was able to refine the initial process to the point where in some cases, cancer could be detected early enough that the surgeons could actually wait a period of time in order for the tumor to grow large enough to be removed more easily.

Eventually, enough medical personnel were trained in the procedure (the technical term is exfoliative cytology) that the initial pioneer could take a deep breath on her own time and reclaim her dining room. For more than one year, she had never taken one day off, and during that time, not one woman tested in this state were put on hold, or were made to either wait for surgery or to receive the happy news that she was cancer free.

For a small community such as Colebrook, events of historic proportions seldom occur, and when they do, quite often go unnoticed for any number of reasons; in this case because of the central character's aversion to any kind of publicity.

Significant medical advances are being made at an ever-increasing rate. Those of the twentieth century would fill a large volume, but among the ones that contributed the greatest benefit to humanity surely must be those in cancer research.