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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Empowering the People: The Freedom House Ambulance Service



Before the 1960s, morticians and police officers provided prehospital “care” in the United States by often providing transport without treatment. Peter Safar, M.D. (*upper left, in white coat*), “father” of cardiopulmonary resuscitation and Founding Chair of the Department of Anaesthesiology at the University of Pittsburgh, viewed this “scoop and run” approach as critical care medicine’s “weakest link.” In the early 1960s, Safar agreed to help a biracial group of civic leaders equip ambulances (*lower center*) to transport critically ill patients on one condition—that he train local citizens to provide state-of-the-art prehospital care. And thus was born the Freedom House Ambulance Service, a groundbreaking program that introduced Black Pittsburgh residents as the nation’s first paramedics. In 1973, Safar recruited Nancy Caroline, M.D. (*upper right*), a bright young Jewish physician, to serve as Medical Director of Freedom House. Caroline transformed the fledgling program into one of national prominence through rigorous classroom, hospital, and field instruction. She also connected with the paramedics personally, riding alongside them in ambulances and offering them a sense of dignity. Her grassroots efforts would lead her to publish *Emergency Care in the Streets*, the first paramedic textbook. Although Freedom House ended abruptly in 1975 due to racial politics and local resistance, the program had revolutionized prehospital medicine. It set national standards, provided excellent care for citizens throughout Pittsburgh, and empowered marginalized laypersons to save lives. (Images from the Peter Safar Papers, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh. Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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