

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 3

April 2018

She Sleeps Well: Dr. Helene Elise Hermine Knabe

NICOLE R. KOBROWSKI*

October 23, 1911 11:30 p.m.

The black snake undulated obscenely between the two women, winding back and forth, circling overhead and between them. A lascivious leer seemed to be affixed to the snake's mouth as it weaved, moving the women closer, but then winding between and pulling them apart. Augusta Knabe couldn't bear to see this horrible apparition between them. She reached for her cousin.

Augusta lost her grip on Helene and sat up in bed breathing hard. She pushed her wet hair back and collected herself. What a horrible dream! Augusta felt bad she had not accepted her cousin's offer of tea the past afternoon. She was sure the dream was her penance for wanting to avoid late afternoon traffic and enjoy the comfort of her home after shopping. Augusta promised herself she would stop by Helene's flat after school and take her to tea the very next afternoon. Despite this promise, Augusta passed the rest of the night fitfully.¹

* Nicole Kobrowski holds a B.S. in Digital Media Communications with a minor in history, and an M.S. from Indiana University. She completed PhD coursework in Adult Community and Higher Education through Ball State University. She is the author of the *Haunted Indiana* series and *A History of Central State Hospital for the Insane*. Much of what is contained in this paper is a summary of her book *She Sleeps Well: The Extraordinary Life and Murder of Dr. Helene Elise Hermine Knabe*.

¹The dream sequence with the snake was later told by Augusta to the press.

That is how I met Dr. Helene Elise Hermine Knabe. I was asked to look into a haunted building that was undergoing renovations. Thoroughly entranced by Dr. Knabe's untimely end, I wanted to know more about her backstory.

It is easy to say Dr. Knabe was born in Rügenwalder-Münde, Germany on December 22, 1875,² but understanding Dr. Knabe's roots and their influence on her life is a delicious puzzle. I assembled over 2,000 pages of information about Dr. Knabe before I started to truly understand her. Jacob Dunn's *Greater Indianapolis: The History, the Industries, the Institutions, and the People of a City of Homes* contains an entry about Dr. Knabe. Some of the information was written by Dunn, but much of Dr. Knabe's life sketch was written by her³ and was clearly done so with a purpose.

For example, in the majority of life sketches, the subject's parents are identified. Dr. Knabe's are not. In fact, the way she words information about her parents indicates that while Dr. Knabe isn't untruthful, she certainly isn't giving more details than necessary. Dr. Knabe identifies her father not by name but as a government worker who inspects bridges and mechanical structures at seaports. Her mother's name isn't mentioned either, but she emphasizes her mother's family was from a military background and religious in nature, and she mentions specific high-profile names and how benevolent and landed her family has been historically.

By triangulating what is known from this article and other records, this information provides knowledge about her life influences. The research indicates that her parents were not married and she was not a biological member of the Knabe family. If this information would have been public in 1910, the impact would have been scandalous enough to destroy Dr. Knabe's high-profile career as a female physician and pathologist. At the very least, Dr. Knabe may have personally felt some shame about being abandoned by her father and losing her mother and somehow shouldered imaginary blame. By not mentioning her parents' names specifically and in the way she has worded their presence in her life, she was able to protect herself emotionally and socially, yet further her career exposure.

Dr. Knabe began living with her uncle, Daniel Ehmke, when she was very young and he raised her. Despite his work as a diver, Daniel appears to have been very progressive in regard to education for

² J. P. Dunn, "Helene E.H. Knabe, MD," in *The History of Greater Indianapolis*, vol. 2, (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1910), 852-854.

³ It was very common in publications of this sort for the subjects to write the bulk of the information about them and sometimes even pay for the inclusion in books. It does not appear that Dr. Knabe paid to be in the publication.

girls. For Dr. Knabe, in addition to the usual household chores, such as sewing, mending and dressmaking, she was publicly schooled and privately schooled at home.⁴ Fortunately for Dr. Knabe, Prussia had a public school system that taught a rigorous science and technology curriculum.

Dr. Knabe wanted to be a doctor. In Germany women were not allowed in medical school until 1900 and it would not be allowed for women in Prussia, where she lived, until 1908.⁵ Dr. Knabe's life changed forever when Augusta Knabe visited her and told of how women were allowed to attend medical school in America.

She arrived in Indianapolis on November 16, 1896.⁶ The motto she heard most often growing up was "You cannot be a master in anything unless you know every detail of the work."⁷ No one applied this maxim more than Dr. Knabe. She worked for four years as a domestic and a seamstress. According to Augusta, Dr. Knabe worked in these capacities in order to learn English "from the best class of people."⁸ Dr. Knabe also attended Butler University for a term to supplement her self-learning and to prepare her for the rigors of medical school.⁹ To submit an application to medical school, she was required to prove she was of good moral character, prove she had a well-rounded education, pass an assessment on "mechanics, hydrostatics, hydraulics, optics and acoustics,"¹⁰ and pass a state medical school exam and score at least 75%.¹¹

In 1900, Helene Elise Hermine Knabe entered the co-educational Medical College of Indiana (MCI), which later became the Indiana University School of Medicine. During her time at school, Dr. Knabe was required to attend her classes, maintain a 75% in all classes, and refrain from drinking. Her days were often fourteen hours long. She paid at least \$1,200 for her medical education (about \$33,022.68 in 2017). This included fees, books and other expenses, including \$5.00 each for every body part, which she was required to dissect. She kept working as a seamstress in the summers to supplement her income when classes were not in session. Dr. Knabe also used her drawing skills by

⁴ *The History of Greater Indianapolis*, vol. 2, 852-854.

⁵ T.N. Bonner, *Becoming a Physician*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 313.

⁶ United States Census Bureau. (1900). [United States Federal Census](#).

⁷ H. Knabe, (n.d.), personal writing.

⁸ *Indianapolis Sun*, October 31, 1911. Dreamt snake crushing her and Dr. Knabe.

⁹ Phone interview, M. Smith, May 10, 2006 (Butler University).

¹⁰ Entrance Requirements, *The Medical College of Indiana, 31st Annual Announcement (1899-1900 Catalogue/ 1900-1901 Announcement)*, front type written material.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

providing medical textbook illustrations to several books including sketches for detailed anatomy, surgery, pathology slides, and illustrating how tissue and other samples looked under a microscope.

Dr. Knabe had many success stories during her schooling. She had been appointed curator of the pathology museum in her junior year by Dr. Frank B. Wynn, the Director of Pathology at MCI and was consequently placed in charge of the pathology labs at the school. The next year, much to the chagrin of many of her male peers, he chose her to be his only preceptee for the year and she began teaching underclassmen, which was an unheard of honor for a student.¹²

On April 22, 1904, Dr. Knabe was one of two women to graduate from MCI.¹³ She stayed on in her positions as a lab curator and clinical professor (for which she was not paid). Appointed a deputy state health officer in 1905 by Dr. J.N. Hurty, the Secretary of the Indiana State Board of Health, Dr. Knabe was the first woman to hold this office in Indiana. Part of her duties were to investigate suspected epidemics, such as typhoid and diphtheria, and make recommendations to correct unsanitary conditions. Dr. Knabe routinely traveled the state to work with the public and doctors, and processed hundreds of pathological samples.

Despite Dr. Knabe's expertise, Dr. Hurty hired Dr. T.V. Keene as Superintendent of the lab. Dr. Keene did not apply for the job but was considered by the members of the State Board of Health due to his "excellence and thoroughness" of his job as City Sanitarian.¹⁴

As the laboratory grew, Dr. Knabe became Assistant Bacteriologist and was expected to work longer hours and spend more time in the field. Dr. Knabe stayed up-to-date on new methods, most notably studying with Dr. Anna Wessels Williams of the New York Research Laboratory. Dr. Williams was brilliant in her own right as the originator of the rapid diagnosis of rabies method based on research from Negri and the co-developer of the diphtheria antitoxin.¹⁵ Dr. Knabe successfully proved the widespread existence of rabies in Indiana. From this work, she implemented ways to prevent the spread of rabies by educating the public about rabies and its consequences.

Eventually Dr. Knabe was promoted to Acting Superintendent and she was paid \$1,400 per year. Dr. Hurty promised her the superintendent position and an increase to \$1,800 or \$2,000 (depending on

¹² A Parting Word to the Class of I.M.C 1907, *The Medical Student*, (1907).

¹³ *Thirty-fourth Annual Commencement of the Medical College of Indiana*, (Indiana Medical Journal, 1904), 463.

¹⁴ "Dr. T.V. Keene Named," *Indianapolis Star*, June 2, 1911, 3.

¹⁵ "[Dr. Anna Wessels Williams](#)," National Library of Medicine.

Dr. Hurty's story of the day). Over a year later Dr. Hurty told Dr. Knabe that there was no money for her salary increase. He told her that because she was a woman she could not command the amount of money the position should pay. Dr. Knabe contacted the newspaper and tendered her resignation, citing discrimination and broken promises.¹⁶

The truth was that Dr. Hurty was misogynistic. From the time Dr. Knabe was promised the superintendent position, Dr. Hurty had been on the hunt for a new superintendent, searching for what he considered, "a real capable man" by actively recruiting Dr. Simmonds.

Although Dr. Hurty told Dr. Knabe the state had no money for her raise, in correspondence with Dr. Simmonds, Dr. Hurty said he would pay \$2,000 the first year and \$3,000 in the second. That was a 47% increase from Dr. Knabe's salary. The final proof of Dr. Hurty's deception is in the raises everyone in the hygiene laboratory received only eleven days after Dr. Knabe's resignation was effective. A pathologist was also hired to help Dr. Simmonds.^{17,18} Dr. Simmonds wrote an article in the first 1909 bulletin about rabies in Indiana and elsewhere, highlighting the work Dr. Knabe had done- with his own byline and no mention of her.¹⁹

By leaving the state agency, Dr. Knabe's dedication to medicine was rejuvenated. Dr. Knabe continued to give back to her profession through her non-paid teaching at the IU School of Medicine and her research, in which she contributed many articles and art to medical journals. She also was a member of many medical organizations including the American Medical Association.

Dr. Knabe hustled by opening her own private practice and continued her rabies research at \$75 or more per case. Social norms of the day did not hinder her when it made sense. While many female physicians shied away from accepting male patients (because they may not take them seriously) or seeing male patients at night for fear of attack, Dr. Knabe insisted on having a phone installed in her apartment in case a patient needed her. She would always answer a knock or a call, regardless of the

¹⁶ "Resigns from the State Laboratory of Hygiene," *Indianapolis News*, November 7, 1908, 20.

¹⁷ J. N. Hurty, Financial Statements for the Laboratory of Hygiene, *Transactions of the State Board of Health*, 28th Annual, (1910), 13-18.

¹⁸ J. N. Hurty, Staff Listing [Special section], *Monthly Bulletin: Indiana State Board of Health*, XI (January 1909), 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

hour.²⁰ Quite often she would treat people for free or accept payments via the barter system. She acquired a piano and the lessons to go with them from this system.

One of her biggest successes was when she became the first elected female faculty for the IVC where she was the Chair of the Parasitology and Hematology.^{21,22} Although there is still some debate, evidence indicates Dr. Knabe may have been the first recognized woman department chair at any veterinary college in the United States prior to 1920.²³

Freed from a government position, Dr. Knabe quietly demonstrated herself a suffragist and she advanced women's rights. She:

- Worked as the medical director for and was an Associate Professor of Physiology and Hygiene (sex education) at the Normal College of the North American Gymnastics Union in Indianapolis. Teaching one class at a rate of \$4 per hour (\$72 per semester), she was the highest paid woman in the Normal College. All the women were given fewer classes than men. Although some men earned less money per hour of instruction, they made more money overall reaching as high as \$420 a semester.²⁴
- Lectured for many professional medical organizations and the YWCA, where she also taught home nursing and hygiene classes (sex education).²⁵
- Networked with women's clubs²⁶ and the Flanner House to create and teach hygiene and sanitation practices to all ethnic groups across the state of Indiana, especially the African-American communities.²⁷

The same night Augusta Knabe had the dream about the black snake between her and Dr. Knabe, a person entered her rooms at the Delaware Flats and brutally cut Dr. Knabe's throat from ear to ear. The killer was skilled enough to cut her on one side first, missing her carotid artery and cutting deep

²⁰ "Bares Lite to Cast Light on Knabe Death," *Indianapolis Star*, November 15, 1911, 1, 6.

²¹ *The History of Greater Indianapolis*, vol. 2, 853.

²² As veterinary medicine was going through its own growing pains, it is interesting to note that Dr. Knabe was only one of five non-veterinary licensed faculty members on staff at the IVC. During this time, the line between medical doctor and veterinary science was still blurred and medical doctors routinely taught veterinary classes. In retrospect, between 1905 and 1912, testing and licensing legislature, which might have eventually forced her out of the college, passed into law.

²³ The Association for Women Veterinarians, *Our History of Women in Veterinary Medicine: Gumption, Grace, Grit and Good Humor*, (Madison, WI: Omnipress, 1997), 90-91.

²⁴ Faculty Payroll Records, *Records from the Normal College of the North American Gymnastic Union Indianapolis, Indiana* (semester II, 1909-1910, month ending April 23, 1910).

²⁵ "Booths Depict Y.W.C.A. Work," *Indianapolis Star*, September 23, 1911, 7.

²⁶ "Women's Civic Club Notes," *Indianapolis Recorder*, November 1, 1911, 1.

²⁷ "News of Colored Folk," *Indianapolis Star*, July 30, 1911, 48.

enough to let her choke on her blood. The second cut just nicked the carotid artery and cut into the spine.²⁸

In the words of Ms. Frances Lee Watson, Clinical Professor of Law at IUPUI, “She was screwed from day one.”²⁹ Dr. Knabe was never treated as a victim; she was treated as a villain. Society in general could not understand a woman that wanted to work in a field that was sometimes unpleasant and coarse. Dr. Knabe was discriminatorily chastised for being assertive in her career and pursuing her dreams. Her character was summarily attacked because she expected equality with her peers, male or female. Because she was a 35-year-old woman, who was a physician living in a small apartment, rather than a grand home with a husband and children, Dr. Knabe was automatically judged unhappy. Due to an unscrupulous estate executor and fantastic innuendo, the public believed her to be an unsuccessful, pauper physician. The truth was Dr. Knabe loved her job and had a plan to continue her work and make herself even more financially stable. She chose to send most of her disposable income back to her uncle Daniel Ehmke because she loved him and he was no longer able to work.³⁰

Some of the very people who should or could have advanced the case more quickly failed in their duties. Police Chief Martin Hyland believed she killed herself because at 5 foot 6 inches and 150 pounds, he thought her either strong enough to ward off any attack or strong enough to kill herself. Even the chain of evidence was just stacked in a room where anyone could have seen it. Fingerprinting was in its infancy and a bloody fingerprint was ignored, although she had no blood on her hands.³¹ Police and some physicians believed she was despondent over her unproven sexual preference or money and killed herself. Even Detective William Burns, known as America’s Sherlock Holmes, publicly stated that based solely on the evidence in the newspapers, he believed she killed herself.³²

Thankfully, the coroner, Dr. Charles O. Durham, reasoned Dr. Knabe was murdered.³³ Dr. Durham noted she had defense wounds on her arms and he was adamant that she could not have made both cuts. Dr. Richard T. Miyamoto, Professor Emeritus, Department of Otolaryngology- Head and Neck Surgery at IUPUI agrees with that assessment. He stated Dr. Knabe could have made the first cut. It was even superficial enough that if she had staunched the blood flow and been provided medical help, Dr.

²⁸ “Coroner of Marion County Testifies,” *Shelbyville Democrat*, December 3, 1913, 1.

²⁹ Phone interview, F. Watson, April 15, 2016.

³⁰ “Defense Seeks to Prove Knabe Death a Suicide,” *Indianapolis Star*, December 3, 1913, 1.

³¹ “Court Shatters State’s Charge and Frees Craig,” *Indianapolis Star*, December 10, 1913, 1, 6.

³² “Burns Favors Suicide Stand in Knabe Case,” *Indianapolis Star*, November 3, 1911, 1, 3.

³³ Dr. Knabe Coroner Verdict, December 25, 1911, Marion County Coroner.

Knabe would have most likely lived. As it was, Dr. Miyamoto believes she choked within seconds and would not have had the physical ability to make such a precise second cut.³⁴

In response, the women doctors who were her friends actively tried to help find her killer, eventually employing a private investigator, Detective Harry Webster, through donations, at their own expense and later, at the detective's own expense.³⁵

Almost fifteen months after her death, two men were indicted by a grand jury, based on Detective Webster's findings. The prosecution believed that Dr. William B. Craig was engaged to Dr. Knabe and that he wanted out. In the past, when he had difficulties with women, he made it go away. One woman who was to be a witness had begged him to marry her when she was fifteen. He said, "I pay cash."³⁶ At the time of her death, Dr. Knabe, who was an accomplished seamstress and dressmaker, had commissioned a dress for \$70 (\$1,932 in 2017). With most dress goods at five dollars per yard, she had provided the material she bought for \$25 to the dressmaker. This highly suggests this was a very special dress for an important occasion. In fact, after her death, the dressmaker destroyed the dress because he said no one would buy a dress of this kind because it would be bad luck.³⁷ Dr. Knabe confided to a friend she was getting married to a man with an "ungovernable temper".³⁸

Dr. William B. Craig was Dean of Students and lecturer and financial stakeholder in the Indiana Veterinary College. He also would have been very familiar with zoology and the "sheep's cut," which is the type reported to have killed her. He met Dr. Knabe in 1905 and maintained at least a friendship. He recommended her for the position as the Chair of Hematology and Parasitology in 1909 at the veterinary college. He was rumored to be Dr. Knabe's fiancé, although this point was vehemently denied by Dr. Craig. He often drove her home and escorted her to events.³⁹

Shortly before her death, Dr. Craig and Dr. Knabe seemed to be in the middle of some sort of ongoing difficulty. Dr. Knabe went to the IVC to see about changing her lecture time with Dr. Craig so that she could attend her course at the Normal College. Dr. Craig became enraged when a colleague asked for his answer and he said "Oh, fuck! Tell her to go to hell!" and he stormed out of the room.⁴⁰

³⁴ Personal Interview, R. Miyamoto, March 28, 2016.

³⁵ "Webster Believes he Grand Jury Did Duty," *Indianapolis News*, December 31, 1912, 3.

³⁶ *Shelbyville Democrat*, December 1-9, 1913.

³⁷ "None Will Don Suit Dr. Knabe Ordered," *Indianapolis Sun*, October 31, 1911, 1.

³⁸ "Opening Statement Made This Afternoon," *Shelbyville Democrat*, December 1, 1913, 1.

³⁹ *Shelbyville Democrat*, December 1-9, 1913.

⁴⁰ "Point is Scored by Defense at Dr. Craig Trial," *Indianapolis Star*, December 4, 1913, 1, 9.

The night before Dr. Knabe died, Dr. Craig's housekeeper overheard them arguing and she heard Dr. Knabe say, "But you can continue to practice and so can I!"⁴¹

The second man indicted, Mr. Alonzo M. Ragsdale, was an undertaker and Dr. Knabe's business associate. Dr. Knabe often joked with Ragsdale that when she died, she would be sure to give him her business. And so she did. Augusta appointed Ragsdale undertaker and estate executor. He was accused of concealing evidence against Dr. Craig in the form of the kimono Dr. Knabe was wearing at the time of her death. It was said he'd laundered it in an effort to rid it of blood stains.⁴²

The defense attacked Dr. Knabe's personal character in the courtroom, claiming she was an aggressive and masculine woman.⁴³ The character witnesses, designed to discredit Dr. Craig suddenly moved out of state or could not be found. A key witness who positively identified Dr. Craig changed his story, and Dr. Craig's own housekeeper, who had signed an affidavit stating she saw him return late and leave early with a bundle of clothes the night Dr. Knabe died, refused to come to the courthouse. The statement just was not nearly as powerful as a live body in the courtroom.⁴⁴

The State's case fell apart and after nine days as the prosecution could not make a connection between Dr. Craig and the evidence. The judge stepped in as essentially the thirteen juror and instructed the jury to acquit Dr. Craig. This instruction was very unusual because normally a judge will provide this instruction only when a technical error was committed, which was not the situation in this trial.⁴⁵ He did rule that the prosecution had proven Dr. Knabe had been murdered, versus suicide, but that they had no real evidence against Dr. Craig.

After the trial, Marion County Prosecutor Frank Baker stated publically that he had warned the State not to try the case and with nonchalant attitude said there was no more to be done.

Because there was now nothing to be an accessory to, the charges against Ragsdale were dropped. No one was ever convicted. Oddly enough after the trial, Ragsdale declared Dr. Knabe's estate insolvent without collecting all debts. Much of her personal items did not sell and their whereabouts were undocumented. The probate records submitted over three years to the courts had erroneous calculations that went unnoticed and several hundred dollars were not reconciled.

⁴¹ See testimony in *Shelbyville Democrat* from December 1-9, 1913

⁴² "Accused in Dr. Knabe Mystery Give Bonds," *Indianapolis Star*, January 1, 1913, 1, 3.

⁴³ This was demonstrated in many newspaper interviews between 1911-1913.

⁴⁴ *Shelbyville Democrat*, December 1-9, 1913.

⁴⁵ Phone Interview, F. Watson, April 15, 2016.

Dr. Knabe wrote that if you did your best, when all was said and done that “there will be no deficit when the final balance is taken.”⁴⁶ Her success as a doctor, artist, and educator ensure her account is in the black.

Dr. Knabe’s work in rabies not only prevented many injuries and possible deaths but paved the way for better prevention methods. Her adult education outreach programs continued even after her death and morphed into bigger and better programs as needs and times changed. The art she contributed to the medical books of the day were important for the time and even though times have changed, those same books, especially “Emergency Surgery” was the basis for contemporary books.

Dr. Knabe upheld what her graduating class called “a profession whose master words are work and service for humanity.”⁴⁷ She worked tirelessly in science and education to bring good to others at sacrifice to herself. While she had to hustle to make money, more so than her male peers, it was through this that she was able to innovate education to empower people and break race and ethnic barriers.

Today, Dr. Helene Elise Hermine Knabe lies in Crown Hill Cemetery. One must wonder what her life would have been like had she lived just a few more years when the needs of WWI would have opened up more opportunities. Dr. Knabe would embrace the current advances in digital tissue diagnostics. As an educator, she would revel in the new training development and delivery methods.

Dr. Helene Elise Hermine Knabe serves as an underrepresented example what can be accomplished as long as one is true to one’s self. She continues to inspire me. As an educator and physician she was innovative, driven, and compassionate. As a fellow adult educator, I strive for the same. I met Dr. Knabe when I was looking for a ghost, and it is she who continues to haunt me today.

⁴⁶ “Dr. Knabe’s Philosophy of Life,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 1, 1913, 10.

⁴⁷ L. D. Carter, R. Poole, H.R. Luckey, & E. Green, Resolutions of Respect. *The Medical Student*, (March 1904), 13-14.