

VIDAL, IRMA (1921–1997)

Irma Vidal was born in Havana, Cuba into a comfortable, middle-class family involved in the tobacco industry with ties in Tampa, Florida, and other U.S. cities. Influenced by a strong-willed mother who firmly believed her son and seven daughters should all be educated, Vidal enrolled at the University of Havana's School of Medicine in 1938, surviving gender discrimination and opposition from male colleagues. Despite her stellar performance in medical school, Vidal was denied a position in the Hematology Department at the Municipal de la Infancia Hospital. Determined to succeed nonetheless, a year later she was accepted in an intern- residency program in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1946 she trained at Lenox Hill Hospital and fell in love with New York City. Vidal provided health care to the working class people in her newfound home for the next ten years. Returning to Cuba, Vidal was offered the opportunity to head the Department of Hematology at the Municipal de la Infancia Hospital, ironically, the same hospital that had denied her a position in the past. When the Cuban Revolution gained control in 1959 Irma's family initially supported its ideology of social equality. Vidal and her husband, also a physician and American born, continued to support the revolution even after many of their relatives fled the country. They were among the few physicians who decided to stay in Cuba. Despite her American education, Vidal renounced her private practice and devoted herself to improving health care for the Cuban people while also caring for her ailing mother and raising her family. a well-respected scientist and educator, for more than thirty years she headed hematology departments at many Havana hospitals, and chaired the Hematology Department at the School of Medicine. Diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1996 her U.S. based family was not granted a humanitarian visa to see her before she died in 1997.