

2020 Barbara Knothe Burn Therapist Achievement Award

Elizabeth “Liz” A. Rivers, RN, OT (1938-2019)



Liz Rivers was a seminal burn clinician for more than 25 years and an American Burn Association member for the last 20 of those years. Her life-long desire to learn and serve others was manifested in her professions as nurse and occupational therapist. After graduating from Saint Mary’s School of Nursing in Rochester, Minnesota, in 1959, she began her career at the University of Minnesota Hospital and later at Shriners Hospital. In 1972, she completed her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Occupational Therapy at St. Catherine’s University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Liz began working at St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center (currently Regions Hospital) and became the Burn Rehabilitation Specialist for the burn program.

During the early 1970s, she visited the Shriners Burn Center in Galveston, Texas, where she had the opportunity to work with the center’s experienced OT Barbara Willis. Willis used the Shrine technique of burn therapy, an opaque thermoplastic face mask that patients wore as their facial burns healed. But Liz was not satisfied with the mask. She thought patients should wear a clear, transparent mask so they could see and participate in the world around them. So, Liz began a relentless process of trial and error with various plastics, looking for the one that would work the best. Eventually, she found the perfect plastic in 1977, publishing her method in 1979. When asked how she originated the idea and created the face mask, Liz said that “God made the plastic face mask through my fingers so that little children could go back to school. They didn’t want to go back to school with those fabric hoods.”

Believing every burn patient should benefit from a transparent face mask, Liz taught therapists at American Burn Association meetings how to make the mask, using simple tools. As lead author, she presented many abstracts about her masks at ABA annual meetings, delivering her last one in 1995. As of 2015, Liz still ranked fourth among all burn therapists for the most abstracts accepted by the ABA and presented at their meetings. Most notably, she was the primary author of the burn community’s most cited face mask article— “The Transparent Face Mask”—published in a 1979 issue of the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Liz shared her clinical knowledge over the years at American Burn Association meetings. She spoke at six ABA educational sessions and presided as moderator over seven scientific and sunrise symposia. In addition, she served on

three ABA committees during her tenure, including her first committee appointment to At -Large Membership in what is now known as the Membership Advisory Committee (MAC). In 1986, Liz was appointed as one of five therapists to serve on the ABA's newly formed Ad Hoc Rehabilitation Committee. In that same year, she was appointed to the Research Committee as its first therapist member. In 1986, for her extensive contributions to burn rehabilitation practice and to the ABA, Liz received the prestigious Curtis P. Artz Distinguished Service Award. She was the second burn therapist to receive the award.

For all who worked with Liz, we remember her as driven, compassionate, and innovative. She has high expectations for providing the best quality of care while allowing time for fun and the creative process. To be Liz's friend or patient was to be blessed with her quiet grace and steadfast love.

Liz retired in 1998 from the Regions Hospital burn team, she remained active in the local burn community and in the Midwest Burn Region. She continued to be a resource for teaching face mask skills and was a champion for providing effective burn rehabilitation to all burn survivors. In 2015, Liz's transparent face mask article was recognized as an example of an innovation that changed the practice of burn rehabilitation and that continues to be utilized around the world in clinical practice thirty-seven years after its development. With the transparent face mask, Liz Rivers has established and distinguished herself as a pioneer from the Midwest in the field of burn rehabilitation. Therefore, for all reasons cited, she truly deserves to be recognized for her contributions to the burn field and to be bestowed with the title of Madam of Burn Rehabilitation.