Suzanne Blanche Marguerite Gros was born on January 19, 1878, in Laon, France, the capital of the Aisne Department, located about 140 km north of Paris. Her father, Victor Antoine (b. 1844), was a successful carriage maker, and her mother, Esther Arthémise Marie née Thomas (b. 1851), was a homemaker. Suzanne was an only child, as her 3 siblings all died in infancy. When she was 6 years old, her father died of tuberculosis. Because the family was well-off financially, Suzanne was able to complete secondary school in Laon despite her father’s death, and she had a typical “bourgeoise” upbringing for the era, including instruction in art, music, sewing, and etiquette.

In 1897, at age 18, Suzanne Gros married a young dermatologist, Dr Marie Joseph “Henry” Pertat, who was 9 years her senior and had graduated from the University of Paris the previous year. Soon bored by domestic life and the limited opportunities for women in fin-de-siècle Paris, she enrolled in the University of Paris with her husband’s encouragement and obtained a baccalaureate degree in 1903, and an additional degree in chemistry in 1905. She then enrolled in medical school at the University of Paris with her husband’s encouragement and obtained a baccalaureate degree in 1903, and an additional degree in chemistry in 1905. She then enrolled in medical school at the University of Paris, intending eventually to join her husband in his dermatology practice.

In 1908, she rotated with maxillofacial surgery pioneer Hippolyte Morestin (1869-1919), and in 1909 she began training with noted dermatologist Louis Brocq (1856-1928) at Hôpital Saint-Louis. In 1912, she scored 4th out of 67 candidates on L‘internat des hôpitaux de Paris, an examination for house officers, and she achieved the highest score on the oral section of the examination.

She gave birth to a daughter, Jacqueline, in 1909. In 1911, she and Henry Pertat separated, but never legally divorced.

In 1911, 66-year-old French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) returned to Paris from a lengthy American tour looking noticeably youthful and “rejuvenated.” Suzanne Gros Petat reportedly knocked on Ms Bernhardt’s door and asked why she looked so different. Bernhardt told her that she had undergone cosmetic surgery on her face in Chicago, and she allowed Gros Petat to examine her skin. Gros Petat then began to experiment with skin surgical techniques on anesthetized rabbits.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Gros Petat was assigned to the Val-de-Grâce military hospital in Paris, again working with Hippolyte Morestin. She dedicated herself to plastic and reconstructive surgery on disfigured soldiers. Along with Dr Morestin, she developed new techniques for repairing the soldiers’ mutilated faces. In June 1918, her husband Henry died; he had been in poor health since mustard gas exposure during wartime service in 1915.

In 1919, she married Dr André Noël, who had been a classmate at the University of Paris and who also specialized in dermatology. As she had not finished her doctoral thesis, she practiced under his medical license. Her daughter, Jacqueline, died of influenza in 1922, at the age of 13. Dr André Noël subsequently developed severe depression and in 1924, he threw himself into the Seine River. In 1925, Gros Noël defended her doctoral thesis, in order to practice independently.

Dr Gros Noël dedicated herself to her patients and her surgical career. She developed cosmestic surgical techniques, and in addition to facial surgeries, performed breast reconstructions, liposuction, and procedures on the abdomen and legs. She
advocated ending the stigma that had often accompanied aesthetic surgery at the start of her professional life. She collaborated closely with plastic surgery pioneer Raymond Passot (d. 1933), and together they performed more than 2500 facial procedures during the 1920s, mostly on wealthier women of Paris.

In 1936, at age 58, Dr Noël had cataract surgery. Although the procedure was successful and she resumed practice, she performed fewer surgical procedures. Instead of seeing patients in a clinic in her apartment in the 7th Arrondissement in Paris as she had done for the previous decade, she moved to the newly founded Clinique des Bluets.

During the Second World War, Dr Noël performed procedures to change the appearance of a number of Resistance workers as well as Jewish refugees sought by the Gestapo. After the war ended, she performed numerous procedures on survivors of concentration camps, including removing physical evidence of their imprisonment.

She was a lifelong advocate for improving the social circumstances and political status of women. In 1923, she organized a demonstration calling on working women in France not to pay taxes, since until 1944, the government did not allow women to vote and offered them few legal rights. She became deeply involved in the Soroptimism movement, a volunteer service organization begun in California in 1921 and dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls. She founded the first Soroptimist club in France in 1924, and later founded numerous Soroptimist clubs across Europe and around the world.

After her death in 1954, she was buried in Montmarte Cemetery in Paris. Dr Noël was honored philatelically by France in 2018 (Scott #5388).

Stamp Vignettes focus on biographical details and accomplishments related to science and medicine, and not individual views and prejudices except where they had a major impact on the subject’s life. The authors do not intend to imply any endorsement of such views when discussing a Stamp Vignette on Medical Science.

Potential Competing Interests: The authors report no competing interests.

Correspondence: Address to David P Steensma, MD, Department of Medical Oncology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, 450 Brookline Ave, Suite D1B30 Boston, MA 02215 (david_steensma@dfci.harvard.edu; Twitter: @DavidSteensma).