Anne Angen Gershon ’60 MD is a trailblazer and a lifesaver.

An internationally-recognized pediatric infectious disease physician, Dr. Gershon is a leader in research and public health policy on vaccines. She has made significant and lasting contributions to international scientific research and public health throughout her pioneering career.

Best known for helping develop vaccines against the varicella zoster virus, the virus that causes chickenpox and shingles, Anne’s research played a crucial role in the final steps of the vaccine’s licensure and broad public use.

Chickenpox used to be one of the most common childhood illnesses. A highly contagious, airborne infection, the same virus can later re-emerge from dormancy in the nervous system and cause shingles.

Before the varicella vaccine was approved in 1995, chickenpox affected about 95 percent of the population. Ten years later, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported as much as a 90 percent drop in chickenpox cases. The CDC now estimates that more than 3.5 million cases of chickenpox, 9,000 hospitalizations, and 100 deaths are prevented by varicella vaccination in the United States every year. Anne helped turn a common and sometimes-deadly disease into a rare and preventable illness. Her work has drastically reduced the number of chickenpox infections, hospitalizations, and deaths both nationwide and around the world.

Not only is Anne a lifesaver, she’s a barrier breaker.

Growing up, she wanted to be a doctor, just like her father, but he warned her, “women aren’t welcome.” Anne persisted. She enrolled at Smith, majored in pre-med, and graduated in 1960. Recently Anne reflected, “My Smith education was crucial in enabling me to become a physician interested in both the art and science of medicine. Without the backing and encouragement of the outstanding Smith faculty, I might well not have achieved my goal, especially at a time when women were strongly discouraged from entering the medical profession.”

She earned her medical degree from Cornell University and went on to become Professor of Pediatrics at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, where she’s been working ever since. As she has for years, she collaborates periodically with her distinguished husband, Dr. Michael Gershon.

Author of more than 350 publications, Anne has edited 14 books and participated on countless scientific committees. Her distinguished awards are too numerous to list.

Today, as we struggle through a deadly pandemic, anxiously await vaccinations, read about the resurgence of measles, and anticipate the inevitable outbreak of new viruses and other global health security threats, Anne Gershon’s work remains as significant and relevant as ever.

Tribute by Medal Committee researcher Nancy Fenn Dietz ’66