

B.N. - WILLIAMS, Cicely

Tribute to Dr Cicely Williams

By Professor Ken Standard & Olive N. Ennever

DR. Cicely Delphine Williams was born at Kew Park, Bethel Town, Westmoreland, Jamaica, on December 2, 1893, of a distinguished Jamaican family. She dedicated her life and work to the service of others, particularly in the area of maternal and child health.

She was proud to be a Jamaican but was also a citizen of the world. She travelled extensively and shared her knowledge and experience in over 70 countries on five continents.

Dr. Williams did her medical training at Oxford University, England, graduating in 1923, following which she served as house physician to the South London Hospital for Women and Children, also at the Queen's Hospital for Children and at King's College. She then completed the D.T.M. & H. Degree.

In 1929, she became the first woman to be appointed to the British Colonial Medical Service, and she was posted to the Gold Coast (now Ghana). It was there that she observed and accurately described the all too prevalent clinical picture of protein-energy malnutrition (p.e.m.) — "KWASHIORKOR" — the disease of the displaced baby, and which affects millions of babies at the weaning stage. In 1936 Dr. Williams received from Oxford University the Doctorate in Medicine.

After seven years in West Africa, she was transferred by the Colonial Medical Service to Malaya as a paediatrician to the College of Medicine in Singapore. Early in 1941, she moved to the Unfederated State of Trengganu as State Medical Officer and her work was interrupted by the invading Japanese forces.

P.O.W

In February 1942, with the fall of Singapore, Dr. Williams became a prisoner of war (P.O.W.). She was head of the Women and Children's Camp and as a result of the stand she took in their interests, she was exposed to the cruel privations of a prisoner of war. After her release from prison, Dr. Williams returned to work in Malaya as Advisor in Child Health and she was called by the World Health Organization to Geneva to be the first Head of the Section on Maternal and Child Health. She worked in Geneva and South East Asia from 1948 until 1951.

As a Jamaican, she paid several brief visits to her homeland and many in Jamaica will remember the

significant contribution she made to the research study and investigation of "Vomiting Sickness", in 1951 — 1953:

"Vomiting Sickness — of unknown cause" — was a serious epidemic among children in Jamaica during the first half of the century. The publicity given to the condition, especially after an outbreak of 150 cases, with 32 deaths in a localized area in 1951, led the Government of Jamaica to vote for its investigation.

Dr. Williams was appointed to direct the research and to act as chairman of a co-ordinating committee which included representatives from the University College of the West Indies, University College Hospital of the West Indies, and the Jamaica Government Medical Services.

Her recommendations included, inter alia:— (a) Improved child care; (b) Investigation of Food Poisoning. The problem should be attacked from many angles, medical, social, education and nutrition; all cases in which any form of food poisoning is suspected, should be made notifiable and should be investigated — whether foul play is suspected or not."

Ultimately, it was discovered that the condition was due to a hypoglycaemic agent, thus causing extremely low blood sugar.

Honours

Dr. Williams received many honours from many countries, universities, associations and organisations. In 1969, she received from the University of the West Indies, the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science (D.Sc.) The one which gave her particular happiness was the Order of Merit (O.M.) of her native land, Jamaica.

Governor General Sir Florizel Glasspole, presented the Insignia of the Order of Merit to Dr. Williams at King's House on Friday, January 9, 1976. In congratulating her, Sir Florizel said, "We have every right to be proud of you because you have brought fame not only to yourself but to Jamaica".

Dr. Williams, in her reply said it was "most gratifying to come home and find an honour of this sort that has given pleasure not only to my family but to the people in my district (Bethel Town, Westmoreland, Jamaica) It makes me very proud".

She paid tribute to the household helpers, "who were largely responsible for teaching us how to behave, not to tell lies, not to tease each other, and to be kind to all animals."

Dr. Williams described her parents as "remarkable people. My father, as you know, was an outstanding character, both as an Inspector of Schools and as Director of Education, he did great work for Jamaica, and produced a book on

School Gardens in 1908 — a big undertaking for a very busy man.

"It must be the first book on this important subject, written for the Third World. Industry is fine and bauxite is fine, but to make a nation we must have food. This is a fact that the economists have even now scarcely begun to realize.

"My mother cared intensely about everything Jamaican. She started, and was devoted to the Mothers' Union. It was from her that I learned the enormous importance of families, of mother and child health and well-being, how much can be achieved by attention to seemingly small details. I believe that whatever we do as doctors and nurses, the main thing is to make and keep parents interested in their children."

Publications

Dr. Cicely Williams has made a great contribution to literature by recording observations and experiences. Some of her principal publications are listed in "Nutrition Reviews", Volume 31 No. 11, November 1973, which is a "Special Number", marking the 80th year of Cicely D. Williams."

Her Bibliography is brought up to date in the Volume "Primary Health Care Pioneer — The Selected Works of Cicely D. Williams — Edited by Naomi Baumslag and published by the World Federation of Public Health Associations and UNICEF 1986.

She worked closely with the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute

(CFNI); she co-authored with Dr. Derrick Jelliffe, "Mother and Child Health — Delivering the Services" — published in 1972.

Dr. Williams continued her col-

laboration with the CFNI through its first Director, Dr. Derrick B. Jelliffe and his successor, Dr. Robert Cooke. He remembers a public lecture which she gave at the U.W.I.

Medical Lecture Theatre in the International Women's Year, when she was 80 years old. Her topic was "KWASHIORKOR". The theatre was packed to capacity. She spoke beau-

tifully on the subject for one full hour, after which the appreciative audience gave her a standing

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ovation! She has been described as "one of the most remarkable doctors of our age."

She was a Visiting Professor to the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine (DSPM), University of the West Indies, and participated in teaching programmes, including that for Community Health Aides. She also made a valuable contribution to the planning of the postgraduate programme — Diploma in Public Health. Dr. Williams encouraged the staff of DSPM by her excitement and enthusiasm for these new programmes.

The Department participated in a Symposium on the occasion of her 80th birthday, organized by the University of Maryland School of Medicine. On that occasion she received an Honorary degree from the University of Maryland, and an Honorary Citizenship from the Governor of Maryland.

Dr. Marvin Cornblath, Chairman of the Department of Paediatrics, and of the arrangements committee, described Dr. Williams as "one of the great women physicians and human beings of our time."

On her 90th birthday, the Department of S.& P.M. was invited to send greetings to the celebration at her own College of Somerville, Oxford. We were very happy to join with her many friends and admirers in saluting this great lady and adding our appreciation and gratitude for her invaluable service to mankind.

The book "Retired Except on Demand" — the Life of Dr. Cicely Williams — by Sally Craddock, published 1983, was the first complete biography of Dr. Cicely Williams, and was released to mark her 90th birthday.

We were looking forward to her 100th birthday, but that was not to be! However, it is hoped that the Government of Jamaica, the University of the West Indies and other interested Agencies and Organizations, may join together and plan a fitting tribute to mark the occasion — in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of her birth — December 2, 1993.

May her life and work continue to be a source of inspiration and encouragement from generation to generation!



Cicely Williams