

Dr. Cicely Williams

Cicely Williams was born in 1893 at Kew Park, Darliston, Westmoreland, and was educated in Jamaica, partly at Wolmer's Girls' School.

During World War I in 1914 she started to take First Aid and nursing classes and thought seriously about studying medicine. In 1916, after her father's death she decided to go to Oxford, her father's alma mater. She was one of the women admitted because there were so few male students during the war.

After graduation in 1923 Cicely decided to specialize in paediatrics and soon applied to the British Colonial Office for an overseas posting. She was sent to the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in 1929 and spent 7 years there, learning to speak Twi and working to improve health conditions. She established clinics and hospitals and improved record keeping. She also worked with African herbal doctors to learn their treatments for diseases for which European medicine had no cures.

Dr. Williams' most important work in Africa was her diagnosis of the common and often fatal condition kwashiorkor. She learned that "kwashiorkor" meant the sickness the older child gets when the next baby is born. This seemed to indicate that, when they were no longer breast-fed, children were not receiving enough to eat. The cure for kwashiorkor was therefore education on children's nutritional needs. She quickly published her diagnosis of kwashiorkor as a protein deficiency disease, which attracted the attention of the medical world.

In the late 1930s she was transferred to Malaya. After suffering from terrible conditions and bad treatment during World War II in Japanese prisoner of war camps, which brought her near to death, she returned to Malaya and was first woman placed in charge of the maternity and child welfare services. She campaigned vigorously against the promotion by the milk companies of dried and canned milk as a substitute for breast-feeding in Third World countries.

From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s she worked first with the World Health Organization, then as a university lecturer in Jamaica, England and Lebanon. Into her nineties Dr. Williams remained an active speaker in many countries world-wide, on her primary interests of maternal and child health, especially nutrition and breast feeding, birth control, the training of personnel and the development of health services. She was also an active member of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War. She died in England in 1992.

She is one of many outstanding Jamaican women who have received recognition for their contributions to the world's peoples.