

1899 – 1978

Dr Mary D. Sheridan MD Dr Mary Dorothy Sheridan, OBE, MA, MD, FFCM, DCH, LRAM. Dr Mary Sheridan was born in 1899, the eldest daughter of a Liverpool Irish GP and a district nurse.

From an early age she displayed an interest in medicine and was fortunate enough to obtain a scholarship to the University of Liverpool School of Medicine where she graduated with honours in 1923. Among a number of her distinguished contemporaries was Dr Henry (later Lord) Cohen of Birkenhead who became a lifelong friend and supporter of her work. After house jobs at Liverpool Royal Infirmary and a brief period as assistant in her father's practice, Dr Sheridan chose to pursue a career in paediatrics. Liverpool University was one of the first to admit women as medical students, however prejudice against women doctors was still strong and this fuelled Dr Sheridan's early commitment to feminism.

She started her career in the relatively humble job of assistant school medical officer in Manchester. Here she first encountered the gross deprivation in the health, housing and education of many children from the poorer areas of the city. She was disturbed to find that the schooling of these children was being hampered by the late diagnosis of hearing, speech and visual handicaps. She soon saw that in order to be able to recognise the earliest symptoms and signs of these conditions, it was essential to be thoroughly familiar with developmental progress in infancy and early childhood and more particularly with the range of normality.

From practical experience she found that the accepted tests of children's intelligence and maturation were in many ways inadequate. This drove her to discover for herself what the normal parameters of a child's development should be at different ages and how best to detect handicapping conditions in their earliest stages.

Dr Sheridan was particularly concerned about speech and language delay in the young child and how this was affected by poor hearing. To facilitate her work, she took the Licentiate in Speech and Drama of the Royal Academy of Music. She had always been interested in literature and drama and was proud of her descent from Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the famous 18th century playwright. Encouraged by William Armstrong, the dynamic director of the Liverpool repertory theatre, she wrote and had successfully performed at the rep a number of plays: 'The City of Ships' (Liverpool and the slave trade), 'Miss Linley of Bath' (R.B. Sheridan's elopement with his wife to be), 'The House on the Moor' (The Brontes and Haworth parsonage) and 'The courageous Sex' (Women doctors and feminism).

She continued her work in Manchester throughout the war becoming a senior school M.O. and publishing a number of papers on speech and language delay. Her expertise in the field of developmental paediatrics was recognised by Dr George Godber, later Chief Medical Officer for England, and shortly after the war she was invited to join the children's department of the Ministry of Health. Here she continued her research and published under the Department's aegis first: 'The Child's Hearing for Speech' (1948) and then the seminal work on child development for which she was to become famous: 'From Birth to Five Years: Children's Developmental Progress.' This was followed by subsequent publications 'Play in Early Childhood: from birth to six years', 'Spontaneous Play in Early Childhood' and 'The Handicapped Child and His Home'. These were illustrated with line drawings based on the many photographs Dr Sheridan took of children in clinics or at play.

To facilitate early diagnosis Dr Sheridan developed the STYCAR (Standard Tests for Young Children and the Retarded) which, in modified form, have remained in use in child health clinics and schools to the present. She was an early advocate of the screening of all infants and young children for potentially handicapping conditions and of the setting up of 'at-risk' registers. Her publications on child development (updated to include more recent research) are still widely used to train doctors, nurses and health visitors in clinics and hospitals.

An inspiring teacher, Dr Sheridan continued throughout her professional life to emphasise the importance of observing the child and recording what he or she actually does as well the vital necessity of listening to the mother's concerns about her child's growth and progress. Virtual Wall of Honour Dr Sheridan retired from the Department of Health in 1964-the importance of her work being recognised by the award of an OBE. She continued research and lecturing as Emeritus Consultant in Paediatrics at Guys Hospital and The Nuffield centre for Speech and Hearing.

Her outstanding contribution to the field of developmental paediatrics was recognised by the award of the James Spence medal of the British Paediatric Association in 1968. Although her mobility was increasingly hampered by arthritis, Dr Sheridan continued to be active and travelled extensively. It was shortly after giving a lecture in her beloved Dublin in 1978 that she collapsed and died at home of a sudden myocardial infarct.

Dr Sheridan is recalled by the founding of a number of child developmental centres in her name - the first of which was at Guys Hospital. While outwardly somewhat forbidding in manner, Dr Sheridan was a kindly woman, whom children trusted completely. She encouraged many (including your contributor) to pursue a medical, particularly paediatric, career. A doughty feminist she particularly championed the role of women in medicine. The inscription of her name on the RSM's 'Wall of Honour' commemorates her pioneering work in child development and screening for handicapping conditions which remains influential to this day.

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