

Dr Beryl Corner

Dr Beryl Corner, who has died at the age of 96, was a pioneering paediatrician in the South West. She was also a doughty champion for women doctors, serving as President and lifetime supporter of the Medical Womens' Federation (MWF) promoting the professional advancement of women doctors and the welfare of women in general. Her career spanned the huge transition that took place in the twentieth century: in the education and career prospects of women doctors, in the development of paediatric practice and in the establishment and growth of the national health service. In all of these Dr Corner played a significant role, locally, nationally and internationally. . In 2006 Beryl was awarded an OBE in the New Years Honours list.

Dr Corner was no shrinking violet, she was determined and tenacious in fighting for a just cause. She had to be in the days when hospital boards refused to appoint women as registrars, female consultants were very few and far between and very few women managed to progress far in hospital medicine. Against the odds Beryl was appointed to Bristol Children's Hospital in 1937 becoming the first consultant paediatrician in the southwest. In 1939 she was awarded the Beaverbrook fellowship for research in rickets at Bristol University where she subsequently led the national survey of the incidence of rickets in wartime.

She was the founder of Bristol's first special care baby unit, Britain's second such unit set up at Southmead hospital in 1946. Dr Corner and her team managed on a meagre budget of £100 to establish six cots in the unit and within a year of establishing the unit they had reduced the mortality rates for babies by 50%. This unit, two years later, cared for the world's first ever recorded set of premature quadruplets born by caesarean section to survive . The Good sisters' birth was an international news story thrusting Dr Corner into the limelight as the attending paediatrician. Three of the sisters were delivered easily but the fourth infant was not breathing and as she described it recently "We had no resuscitation equipment then such as we know it now. But I had a sucker that I sucked with a rubber tube down the baby's throat, and after about four or five minutes the baby cried and breathed; and she lived".

During the 1940s and 50s Doctor Corner conducted numerous national research projects and was paediatrician in charge of the Bristol centre. Her research papers received national acclaim and in 1956 she received The Markham Skeritt Prize for Medical Research. She was at the forefront of the development of paediatric medicine and made an outstanding contribution to modern neonatal care with her work on retinopathy of prematurity and kernicterus.. Doctor Corner's reputation gave her national status not only in the field of paediatrics but also as a role model for women in medicine and she became one of the first women to be admitted to the British Paediatric Association in 1945. She later became President of the paediatric section of the Royal Society of Medicine.

Dr Corner was in the vanguard of that handful of women Doctors who achieved successful careers in hospital medicine in the 1930's and 40s. She was a very active member of the Medical Women's Federation as the Bristol Branch President and subsequently national President. Her knowledge of the history of paediatrics was encyclopaedic; her talks on the subject were always fascinating in their depth and insight. In her work for the Medical Women's Federation she was always conscious of the debt owed to the pioneering women doctors of the late nineteenth and early 20 th century. From 1971 to 88 she was Careers Adviser to women doctors in the postgraduate department of Bristol University and represented the interests of women doctors on the South West Regional Postgraduate Committee.

Doctor Corner undertook many international consultancies for the World Health Organization (WHO) during the late nineteen sixties and seventies. She worked on a fourteen year project concerned with the teaching and practice of neonatology in all the medical colleges of the southeast Asian region. Her international medical service included work with the British Council in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Back home in Bristol Dr Corner was made an honorary paediatrician to the Bristol and Clifton Zoological Society specializing in the care of baby primates and particularly gorillas.

Doctor Corner was born in Bristol in 1910, the eldest of three children and in her own words she "had a very happy childhood. We were a very middle class family and my mother was very keen particularly on education for children". She attended Redland High School and typically at the age of 10, learning in assembly that Bristol City Council were awarding scholarships, she decided to apply. With her parents away in the Lake District on holiday she completed the scholarship form and despite the fact that her class had not done the curriculum in mathematics she took the examination and won a scholarship. As she once said " I think that showed my first bit of enterprise." It was not to be the last in a long and distinguished career. She remained active and involved in medicine to the last regularly delivering typically lucid and extensive talks on aspects of paediatric history and practice and maintaining her lifelong commitment to the Medical Women's Federation and the careers of women in medicine.

Dr Beryl Corner MBBS MD FRCP FRCPCH OBE born May 1910; died 4th March 2007