

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



JAMES DEENY (1906-1994)

Public Health Pioneer

James Deeny was born 7 November 1906 in Lurgan, Co. Armagh, the eldest of three children of Dr. Michael and Jane Deeny. He was educated in Lurgan and Clongowes Wood College and subsequently Queens University Belfast (QUB), where he graduated with a B.Sc. in biochemistry, bacteriology, and pathology, as well as a diploma in public health.

He then studied in Dublin at the Royal College of Physicians, and in 1930 travelled to Vienna, where he worked in the State Service Institute under the auspices of the American Medical Association, specialising in the bacteriology of tuberculosis. In September 1931 he joined his father's practice in Lurgan, the beginning of a varied and accomplished career at home and abroad. Conscious of practising medicine in an age where the Victorian type of clinical practice was still prevalent, he was determined to pursue a more modern approach by utilising scientific surveys and reports, coupled with a humanitarian approach to the victims of illness.

He first came to prominence in the 1930's, after publishing an assessment of the nutritional deficiencies of male factory workers in Lurgan in the *Journal of the Ulster Medical Society*. In 1941 he was elected a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and a member of the Royal Irish Academy (MRIA), as well as chairman of the mid-Ulster division of the British Medical Association. He continued to receive the attention of medical academics through his research into nicotinic acid deficiency. During the Second World War he became a chemical warfare officer for Lurgan, and the ministry of health in London also sought his advice on nutrition in Northern Ireland.

His reputation, as well as his socio-economic expertise in relating health to poverty, led to his appointment as chief medical adviser to the Department of Local Government and Public Health (the Department of Health after 1947) in Dublin in 1944. From the outset he was vigorous in his pursuit of a public health monitoring programme, the eradication of TB, and improving and expanding hospital care, and his appointment increased the pressures on the chief medical officers of local authorities to improve preventative health services. He had a major responsibility in preparing a plan for the development of a

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National Health Service in 1945. In May 1948 he attended the first assembly of the World Health Organisation in Geneva as chief of the Irish delegation. He left the department (1950) to conduct a three-year national TB survey, returned in 1953, and was subsequently given leave to work with the World Health Organisation (WHO), conducting national TB surveys in Sri Lanka and British Somaliland, and serving (1956–8) as the WHO chief of mission in Indonesia.

In 1962 he resigned from the service of the Irish government, and till 1967 served as chief of senior-staff-training for the WHO in Geneva. On returning to Ireland, he continued to do consultancy work for the WHO in Syria and Russia. In 1971 he was appointed as Medical Adviser to the Vatican organization Cor Unum, which was responsible for the co-ordination of catholic charities worldwide. In 1983 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from QUB.

His autobiography *To Cure and to Care* was published in 1989 and a selection of his research papers, *The End of an Epidemic, Essays in Irish Public Health 1935-65* was published in 1995.

James Deeny died on 3rd April 1994 in Rosslare, Co. Wexford.

Patrick Devlin