

Dr. Vera Carstairs (1925-2020)

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Dr. Vera Carstairs who died on 14 December at the age of 95, made a significant contribution to public health research, in particular her work on aspects of inequalities in health in Scotland.

A social scientist, she spent much of her professional life in the civil service. From the mid 1960s to 70s she was Principal Research Officer in the Scottish Home and Health Department. Thereafter, she was promoted to Assistant Director in the Information Services Division of the Scottish Health Services Information Services Agency where she remained until retiring in 1988. She was made Honorary Fellow in the Department of Public Health Sciences at the University of Edinburgh Medical School and appointed National Co-ordinator of Health Services Research Networks in 1991.

An Honorary Member of the Faculty of Public Health from 1991, she had already served as Chair of the Society for Social Medicine (1982-3) continuing thereafter on the latter's list of honorary members. Straddling the world of public health and social research she was in addition a member of the Social Research Association and would attend the annual conferences of the British Sociological Society Medical Sociology Group. In 1995 she was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Medicine by the University of Edinburgh. In his presentation of her at the Graduation Ceremony, the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine made a point of observing that although 'not a medical graduate' it was a 'particular mark of respect' that the University wished to award her an Honorary MD 'for the many contributions which she has made to the broad canvas of medical research'.

She is likely to be most well known for the careful, detailed work that underlies devising an index of deprivation for Scotland which she proposed is 'a valuable tool for the analysis of health data in relation to socio-economic circumstances which overcomes many of the limitations which arise in the use of the more traditional measure of social class'. She would probably wryly agree that such indices, which are to support the suitable and effective allocation of health care resources, are needed more than ever as the Sars-CoV-2/COVID 19 pandemic exposes the extent of social deprivation so starkly.