

Professor Emeritus Richard Williams Olmsted
June 27, 1920 – March 8, 2013



Professor Emeritus Richard Williams Olmsted, Department of Child Health, The UWI, Mona and Psychiatrist, Ministry of Health, Jamaica

“The best way to find your self is to lose yourself in the service of others.” – Mahatma Ghandi

This quotation exemplified the life of Richard Williams Olmsted, who was born June 27, 1920 in Connecticut, United States of America (USA), graduated from Harvard Medical School and completed his paediatric residency at the Grace (Yale) New Haven Hospital in Connecticut. His distinguished academic posts included Professor and Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Oregon Medical School, Vice Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics, University of Colorado Medical Center, Physician in Chief, Denver Children’s Hospital and Associate Executive Director of the American Academy of Pediatrics, where he was also an official examiner for many years. His research interests were in speech and hearing defects of childhood. He authored numerous research manuscripts and book chapters including submissions to the famous ‘Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics’. Professor Olmsted contributed in the areas of service to ambulatory and hospital paediatrics, as well as in the behavioural aspects of paediatric care and paediatric education. These contributions were well recognized in the awarding of the George Armstrong Award of the Association for

Ambulatory Pediatrics in the USA, of which he was the founding member.

Acting on a burning desire to share his expertise in a resource-challenged setting, Professor Olmsted then successfully pursued the Master’s Degree in Community Medicine in Developing Countries from the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, England. After travelling to Jamaica in 1982, he was Professor and Head of the Department of Child Health, The University of the West Indies (UWI), for three years initially and then for a further 18 months. Recognizing the need for child psychiatry services in Jamaica, he went back to the USA where he pursued and completed a three-year residency in child psychiatry. He then returned to Jamaica where he assisted the Ministry of Health with the development of child and adolescent mental health services for another three years.

Professor Olmsted, while at UWI, was easily described as a wise, honest and plain-speaking man who was warm, kind, generous, understanding and compassionate to patients, families and staff alike. He did much to build up and to

maintain excellent working relationships between the different levels of staff on his team. He set up a visiting Paediatric Professorship Programme, through which consultant specialists on sabbatical leave from the USA and England would visit The UWI for one-month slots to assist with resident education. These included the famous “Waldo” Nelson, Chief Editor of Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics. He later expanded the paediatric subspecialty services by facilitating the placement of several graduate residents into international postdoctoral fellowship training programmes. Later, working through the American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, he conceptualized and implemented, through UNICEF, a three-year programme for visiting professors in child psychiatry who came to Jamaica and worked in the clinics, teaching the staff to manage children, particularly those in especially challenging circumstances. In his twilight years, he was a member of the Board of Governors and also a Trustee of the Dorenbrecher Children’s Hospital, in Portland, Oregon. He also wrote and published a humorous book of jokes entitled “A Smile a Day Keeps the Doctor Away.”

In 2004, The UWI Department of Paediatrics honoured Professor Olmsted with a special “Celebration of Academic Excellence in Paediatrics” (1) where several of his now international graduates in paediatrics and its sub-specialities showcased their work. The Paediatric Association of Jamaica also gave a posthumous award in 2013 in honour of

Professor Richard Williams Olmsted for his selfless and dedicated service to children of the developing world.

Professor Richard Olmsted departed this life in Portland, Oregon, USA on March 8, 2013, leaving behind his childhood sweetheart and wife of 69 years, Barbara “Bobbie” Andrews Olmsted, four children: Jill, Deke, John and Tim (A son, Peter, died in infancy in 1952.), four grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. A celebration to honour his life was held on Thursday, April 18, 2013 at the University Chapel.

“In the end, it’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.” – Abraham Lincoln

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REFERENCE

1. Christie CDC. A celebration of academic excellence in paediatrics in honour of Professor Richard Olmsted. *West Indian Med J* 2004; **53**: 363–5.