

DR. HELEN RODRIGUEZ-TRIAS

Year of Birth / Death: 1929 - 2001

Medical School: University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine

Geography: New York and Puerto Rico

Career Path: Pediatric medicine

Education: Teaching

Public health: Social medicine



INSPIRATION

Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias wanted to be a physician because medicine "combined the things I loved the most, science and people. I understood that medicine would give me more direct and independent ways to contribute to society, not through organizations or abstract studies, but acting directly on the individual."

Year	1971
Achievement	Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias was a founding member of the Women's Caucus of the American Public Health Association.
Year	1970
Achievement	Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias was a founding member of Committee to End Sterilization Abuse.
Year	2001
Achievement	Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias received the Presidential Citizen's Medal for her work on behalf of women, children, people with HIV and AIDS, and the poor.
Year	1993
Achievement	Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias was the first Latina to be elected president of the American Public Health Association.
Year	1979
Achievement	Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias was a founding member of the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse.

BIOGRAPHY

Through her efforts to support abortion rights, abolish enforced sterilization, and provide neonatal care to underserved people, Helen Rodriguez-Trias expanded the range of public health services for women and children in minority and low-income populations in the United States, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Born in New York in 1929, Helen Rodriguez spent her early years in Puerto Rico, returning with her family to New York when she was 10. Growing up as a Puerto Rican in New York City, she had experienced racism and discrimination first-hand. Rodriguez-Trias graduated from the University of Puerto Rico in 1957 where she became a student activist on issues such as freedom of speech and Puerto Rican independence. Later she re-enrolled at the University of Puerto Rico to study medicine, a field that "combined the things I loved the most, science and people."

She obtained her medical degree with highest honors in 1960, and gave birth to her fourth child. During her residency, she established the first center for the care of newborn babies in Puerto Rico. Under her direction, the hospital's death rate for newborns decreased 50 percent within three years.

When she returned to New York in 1970, Dr. Rodriguez-Trias decided to work in community medicine. At Lincoln Hospital, which serves a largely Puerto Rican section of the South Bronx, she headed the department of pediatrics. Her patients, among the lowest-income populations in the United States at that time, were struggling for greater political power and better health care.

At Lincoln Hospital, Rodriguez-Trias lobbied to give all workers a voice in administrative and patient-care issues. She also tried to raise awareness of cultural issues in the Puerto Rican community amongst health care workers at the hospital. At that time, she was also an associate professor of medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Yeshiva University, and later taught at Columbia and Fordam universities.

Throughout the 1970s, Dr. Rodriguez-Trias was an active member of the women's health movement. She was inspired by "the experiences of my own mother, my aunts and sisters, who faced so many restraints in their struggle to flower and reach their own potential." After attending a conference on abortion at Barnard College in 1970, she focused on reproductive rights.

Rodriguez-Trias joined the effort to stop sterilization abuse. Poor women, women of color, and women with physical disabilities were far more likely to be sterilized than white, middle-class women. In Puerto Rico, for example, between 1938 and 1968, a third of the women of child-bearing age were sterilized without being fully informed of its consequences.

Rodriguez-Trias was a founding member of both the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse and the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, and testified before the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for passage of federal sterilization guidelines in 1979. The guidelines, which she helped draft, require a woman's written consent to sterilization, offered in a language they can understand, and set a waiting period between the consent and the sterilization procedure.

In the 1980s, Rodriguez-Trias served as medical director of the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute, where she worked on behalf of women with HIV. In the 1990s, she focused on reproductive health as co-director of the Pacific Institute for Women's Health, a nonprofit research and advocacy group dedicated to improving women's well-being worldwide. Rodriguez-Trias was a founding member of both the Women's Caucus and the Hispanic Caucus of the American Public Health Association and the first Latina to serve as president. She lobbied for health and reproductive issues in International Women's Conferences in Cairo and Beijing. Toward the end of her life she said, "I hope I'll see in my lifetime a growing realization that we are one world. And that no one is going to have quality of life unless we support everyone's quality of life...Not on a basis of do-goodism, but because of a real commitment...it's our collective and personal health that's at stake."

In January 2001 she received a Presidential Citizen's Medal for her work on behalf of women, children, people with HIV and AIDS, and the poor. Helen Rodriguez-Trias died of complications from cancer in December, 2001.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

What was my biggest obstacle?

A watershed in my life was getting divorced in Puerto Rico—that was my second marriage—and leaving Puerto Rico to become part of the women's movement. In my formation as a professional, there was always a kind of pressure to deny or not use a lot of your personal experience. The science of medicine, to some degree, negates the human, feeling, experiential part of it. But I was now discovering a whole other world out there through my personal experience of a deceptive marriage. That triggered quite a bit of growth in me toward understanding what happens internally to people, what happens in their lives and what they can do or not do...So I went back to New York and I got very involved in reproductive rights. I began to join in the women's movement. At Barnard College there was a conference called the First International Conference on Abortion Rights that was attended by a few thousand women...We organized one of the first consciousness-raising groups of Latino women...A number of incredible things emerged from women talking about their experiences...We shared and we became very bonded. That was the beginning of my identification with women's issues and reproductive health.

Who was my mentor?

Dr. Rodriguez-Trias has said, she was inspired by "the experience of [my] own mother, my aunts and sisters, who faced so many restraints in their struggle to flower and realize their full potential.

Quite a few people in medical school inspired my work, particularly Dr. Jose Sifontes, one of my professors. He was one of the pioneers in pediatric tuberculosis...He had a very humble way about him. He was definitely an inspiration because he had a sense that what was happening in the community was something that affected health. He said that tuberculosis was a disease of poverty, of malnutrition, of overcrowding.

Many other people have been great inspirations for me. If you talk about global leadership, I think of Bill Foege. When we were both on the board of APHA, I got to know something about his thinking and how he presented things, his forcefulness.

How has my career evolved over time?

Dr. Rodriguez-Trias began her career as a pediatrician in Puerto Rico in the 1960s, but became increasingly concerned with social factors that affected health and access to health care. On moving to New York, she practiced community medicine, supporting grassroots efforts for change in the Puerto Rican community served by Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx and training medical students to become aware of and involved with the neighborhoods they would serve. Over time, she focused increasingly on policies related to women's reproductive and other health issues, on the health of children, and on the needs of those with HIV and AIDS. Through her leadership in national and international organizations, the impact of her work and advocacy expanded to affect people worldwide, particularly in developing nations.

Source: https://cfmedicine.nlm.nih.gov/physicians/biography_273.html