

COMMITTEE ON NUTRITION

ROBERT R. WILLIAMS, A MEMORIAL NOTE

WITH A note of sadness, the Committee on Nutrition of the American Academy of Pediatrics wishes to call to the attention of the membership the death of Robert Ramapatnam Williams. A noted chemist and scientist, Dr. Williams obtained world renown for his work on the isolation, identification, and synthesis of vitamin B₁. He died at his home in Summit, New Jersey, in October 1965.

Born in Nellore, India, February 16, 1886, of American missionary parents, he began teaching in the Philippines in 1908 and considered the Islands his second home.

Williams never found time to earn a doctorate, although he attended Ottawa University (Kansas) and the University of Chicago for undergraduate and postgraduate work. He earned a B.S. in 1907 and an M.S. in 1908 and received honorary LL.D. and D.Sc. degrees from numerous universities.

The story of his work with beriberi is one of the most exciting in the field of nutrition. While working in the Philippines in 1910 with the Chemical Division of the Bureau of Science, he became interested in the disease. He assisted in treating an infant dying of beriberi with brown-rice bran syrup. The child's dramatic recovery stirred the synthesis of thiamine chloride. His work culminated in extensive field trials, again in the Philippines, shortly after World War I. For this study, the Bataan peninsula was divided into two parts. In the western area the inhabitants ate plain white rice; those in the eastern area received plain white rice enriched with rice coated with vitamin B₁ concentrate. Within weeks the death rate from beriberi dropped dramatically in the eastern area. It remained high in the western area until smugglers began "running in" the treated rice.

In addition to an extensive bibliography

of original papers, Williams is well-known for the following books: *Vitamin B₁ and its Medical Use* (with T. D. Spies) and *Toward Conquest of Beriberi*.

He served many years with the Department of Agriculture and was Chemical Director of the Bell Telephone Laboratories for approximately 20 years. Honored by being named president of the American Institute of Nutrition, he also served on the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council. Among the many awards Williams received were the Franklin Institute's Elliot Cresson Medal and the Babcock-Hart Award of the Nutrition Foundation. The Philippine government named him an honorary member of the Philippine Association of Nutrition and the Philippine Society for Public Health, and he was decorated with the medal of the Philippine Chemical Society.

Royalties from his discoveries could have made him wealthy. But, his life was devoted to serving society and he chose not to sell the patent and production rights for synthesizing thiamine chloride. These were turned over to a non-profit foundation, administered by the Research Corporation of New York City, to be used as grants for research. Several hundred investigators in the field of nutrition have benefited from this fund. Recently a \$290,000 grant to finance construction of the Williams Laboratories for research and nutrition studies was presented to the Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore, India.

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PEDIATRICS, Vol. 38, No. 5, November 1966

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