Honoring Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias

Insights 10.01.25

In celebration of National Hispanic Heritage Month, we honor the remarkable contributions of Dr. Helen Rodríguez-Trías, MD, a pioneering pediatrician, educator, and public health advocate whose work significantly shaped health policy for marginalized communities, especially women and children of color. Dr. Rodríguez-Trías was deeply committed to addressing the intersection of health, social justice, and human rights.

Dr. Rodríguez-Trías was born in New York City in 1929 and grew up in Puerto Rico and the United States. She attended the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine, graduating with highest honors while raising three children, with a fourth born following her graduation. During her residency, she started the first newborn care center in Puerto Rico, decreasing the hospital's death rate for newborns by 50 percent in three years. While practicing in New York, she continued to support pediatrics in low-income populations and raised awareness of cultural issues within the Puerto Rican community.

She later committed her time to actively engaging in women's health, specifically regarding reproductive rights. Through her experiences and clinical work, she turned further to advocacy and health policy. Her health policy work focused on:

- **Reproductive Rights and Justice**: She was a founding member of the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, later known as the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, advocating against coercive sterilization practices that disproportionately affected poor women and women of color.
- **Leadership in Public Health**: In 1993, she became the first Latina president of the American Public Health Association (APHA), where she emphasized the need for culturally competent care and equitable health access. APHA honored her by creating the Helen Rodriguez-Trias Social Justice Award, awarded annually in her name to a person who has led, advocated and/or mentored underserved and disadvantaged populations.
- **HIV/AIDS Advocacy**: As medical director of New York State Department of Health's AIDS Institute in the 1980s, she focused on improving care for women and children affected by HIV, a population often overlooked in early public health responses.
- **Global Health Equity**: As codirector of the Pacific Institute for Women's Health in Los Angeles from 1996 to 1999, Dr. Rodríguez-Trías helped expand public health services for underserved populations across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Dr. Rodríguez-Trías received the Presidential Citizens Medal in 2001 for her lifelong dedication to health equity. Her work continues to inspire public health professionals committed to justice, inclusion, and systemic reform.

"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." -Dr. Helen Rodríguez-Trías