

DR. J.W.B. DOUGLAS

Douglas was born a clergyman's son in Alperton, Middlesex, in 1914. He went up to Oxford, a Demy in Natural Sciences at Magdalen College and a Choral Scholar, taking a First in Natural Sciences (Physiology), and later a B.Sc. in Primate Behaviour. He qualified M.B.Bch. (St Barts) in 1939, and became Research Assistant on Animal Behaviour under Dr S. (later Lord) Zuckerman, editor of the *Bulletin of Animal Behaviour* 1939-42, and Lecturer in Physiology at Exeter College 1941-42. Between 1942-45 he was Research Officer at the Oxford Extra Mural Unit of the Ministry of Home Security.

Like many young people at the time Douglas was concerned about the inequalities in opportunity, home and family circumstances and health in society. Thus, when the opportunity arose to investigate the state of obstetric care in Britain, and the role of obstetric factors in the falling birth rate, Douglas was naturally attracted to the post of executive director of the study. This investigation was undertaken by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Population Investigation Committee under the stimulus of the Royal Commission on Population, and concerned all the births that took place in England, Wales and Scotland in one week in March 1946. The findings informed the planners of the future National Health Service about the costs of having a baby, revealed the need for change in the regulations governing anaesthesia in labour, and showed the considerable social class and regional differences in chances of infant survival. This was to become the pattern of study of perinatal risk in the two influential investigations of 1958 and 1970.

Douglas saw the value of studying the growth and development of a social class stratified sample of the children originally studied at birth in 1946, and wisely selected a nationally representative sample. Through the inclusion of a wide range of information on home, school and family circumstances in the ten follow-up studies which he conducted when the study children were aged 2-15 years, he was able to show the importance of these extrinsic factors in the development of risk of illness and death, and the relatively poor growth and slower development, in every respect, of those in lower social class families. Findings from the preschool years were published in his book Children Under Five (with M. Blomfield).

In 1961, when the follow-up studies had continued for fifteen years, Professor D.V. Glass, chairman of the Population Investigation Committee, introduced James Douglas to Sir Harold Himsworth who was then Secretary of the Council, and the idea was developed of continuing the study within an MRC Unit. In the following year the Unit for the Study of Environmental Factors in Mental and Physical Illness was begun in Professor Glass's Department at the London School of Economics. The follow-up study, by then formally known as the National Survey of Health and Development, but more often as the Douglas study, continued as part of that Unit until Douglas's retirement in 1979, when it became the responsibility of an External Scientific Staff team, now in the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College, London.

During the life of his Unit Douglas continued to make the National Survey his main concern, publishing two more books (The Home and the School and All Our Future, the latter with J.M. Ross and H.R. Simpson) and many papers. The Unit's work also included observational studies of maternal behaviour, and the development of instrumentation to monitor mothers' responses to the cries of their infants. He made good use of the longterm prospective nature of the National Survey data, for example in investigations of the early adult outcomes of low birthweight, the longterm effects of admission to hospital in early childhood, and the early life development of risk of bronchitis in adulthood.

Douglas' efforts to continue his study, largely with Council's support during the adult years, were not without opposition. Yet the value of his legacy of longterm data prospectively collected from birth, on a 'normal' representative population, is now evident when epidemiological hypotheses about the aetiology of risk in many chronic illnesses implicate whole life time development. By using the then current paediatric models of the importance of a wide spectrum of social and family influences in the early life data collections Douglas provided a rich foundation of information with which to explore many of today's

epidemiological hypotheses. The study's lifetime data, both on the sick and the healthy, provide a unique source of information on the processes of acquisition and avoidance of risk in mental and physical illness, and on the social and psychological effects of many serious illnesses.

James Douglas was a good humoured, imaginative and inspiring Director, generous in the advice and time he gave his staff. His contributions in paediatrics and epidemiology were recognised in the award of the British Paediatric Association's James Spence Medal, Honorary Life Membership of the British Paediatric Association and the Society for Social Medicine, and an Honorary Fellowship at the London School of Economics.