

OBITUARIES

Prof. E. M. Killick

PROF. ESTHER MARGARET KILLICK died on May 31. Her sudden death ended an active and productive professional life, during which she made significant contributions to physiological knowledge, participated widely in academic administration, and was held in high esteem by students and colleagues alike.

Esther Killick came of a medical family, and after her education at Leeds Girls' High School, proceeded to the University of Leeds. Having obtained her medical qualifications, she began her professional career as an investigator to the Safety in Mines Research Board. During this appointment she demonstrated her clinical ability by obtaining the membership of the Royal College of Physicians at the first attempt, without having previously held a house appointment. During her association with the Mines Research Board she came into contact with J. S. Haldane and his work, and her interest in respiratory problems persisted up to the time of her death, when she was still actively engaged in research in respiratory physiology. This interest had a basis in the feeling that her best contribution to medicine would be in the study of the etiology of human respiratory disease, especially in mining and other industries.

Following the work in Leeds, she was appointed lecturer in industrial medicine and hygiene in the University of Birmingham in 1935. Three years later she was appointed lecturer in applied physiology in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and at the same time married Prof. A. St. G. Huggett, professor of physiology at St. Mary's Hospital Medical School. She had two daughters, born in 1940 and 1945. After spending four years at the London School of Hygiene, on the retirement of Prof. Winifred Cullis from the Sophia Jex-Blake chair of physiology in the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, she was appointed to this professorship. She thus came to control a department in a school which has a notable record of pioneering educational achievements, and which has, in the past, fostered the cause of education in the sciences for women, when other schools maintained an attitude of indifference, or even of open hostility.

Prof. Killick entered into the problems of her professional appointment with great energy and evolved a well-balanced and highly efficient department, at the same time actively pursuing her own research interests and entering very fully into administrative work. In the course of these activities she contributed, over a long period, research work of high quality, particularly on the effects of carbon monoxide on man and animals. This particular aspect of respiratory physiology and pathology became more and more her special interest in medicine. She was the first to show that the mouse and man acclimatize to carbon monoxide differently, and that the latter does so by the pulmonary epithelium developing the power of actively inhibiting the passage of carbon monoxide from the lungs into the blood, thereby allowing more oxygen to be taken up than would occur if both gases entered by diffusion. This active intervention by the epithelium of the

lung explained in an unexpected way the phenomenon which Haldane some years previously had attributed to active secretion of oxygen into the blood. In fact, as Esther Killick showed, Haldane was right in attributing an active role to the pulmonary epithelium, but it was not active transport of oxygen. Her special knowledge in this field was sought widely, both in Great Britain and in the United States, particularly by the U.S. Air Force. She served on various committees concerned with this aspect of physiology, both during and after the War, with the Royal Navy and the Medical Research Council.

In 1953 she worked as a visiting professor in the Department of Medicine at Johns Hopkins Medical School with Dr. R. L. Riley and Dr. Joseph Lillenthal.

She took an active and exceedingly useful part in the administrative work of the University of London. In this she showed exceptional powers of quick and logical thought, and the ability to eliminate the irrelevant and the redundant. She was, in consequence, a most effective chairman, and occupied this position on the Board of Studies in Physiology, and the Board of Pre-Clinical Studies. She was a member of the Board of the Faculty of Medicine, and her advice and opinion were particularly valued on the Senate Committee on Colleges Overseas in Special Relation. Perhaps her work on the latter was her most outstanding contribution to the University, since she participated in the establishment of the Preclinical Departments in the Colleges of Ibadan and the West Indies, and on various occasions served as examiner or visiting representative of the University of London. She also served on the Committee of the Central Research Funds of the University and on the Special Advisory Board on Biophysics.

These various activities illustrate her energetic participation over the whole field of academic work, but they cannot convey the outstanding characteristic of Esther Killick. This was the possession of a quiet manner and a kindly and pleasant disposition which accompanied a keen and quick intelligence and a character of exceptional resolution and determination. These characteristics were discernible in all she did and, in addition, those of her colleagues who have participated in university examinations with her will always remember her quiet approach to the candidates, the kindly appreciation of their problems, and the scrupulous accuracy of assessment of their work.

Esther Killick was guided by certain principles, and one of these was the belief that women, just as well as men, could contribute to society and to a profession by reason of their intrinsic worth; and that they could pursue an active career and simultaneously bring up a family. In both of these she achieved success.

In her work she upheld the traditions of the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, the School which appointed in the person of her predecessor the first woman professor of physiology in the University of London. Over the period of nearly twenty years during which Esther Killick worked at the Royal Free, she was held in esteem and affection by her students, her staff and by a wide circle of colleagues.

W. BURNS