



# Richard Smithells 1924-2002

## Paediatrician

**Dick Smithells trained at St Thomas's hospital Medical School. He worked in Leeds for three years, becoming a lecturer at the University of Liverpool in 1959 and a consultant paediatrician and medical superintendent for Alder Hey Hospital in 1964. In 1968 he became Professor of Paediatrics and Child Health in Leeds.**

The main focus of his work was on the prevention of disease in children. His research into the links between poor nutrition, such as vitamin deficiency, and malformations of the spine and brain (spina bifida) was of major importance. He demonstrated that the proportion of mothers who had malformed babies and also were deficient in folate was much higher than those mothers who had healthy babies.

Dick Smithells' overriding aim was to prevent handicap in babies and children. Shortly after he came to Leeds he established a laboratory

to study the effect of drugs and nutrition on the early development of the embryo and foetus. By 1991 the Medical Research Council announced that "public health measures should be taken to ensure that the diet of all women who bear children contains an adequate amount of folic acid". He also showed the value of rubella vaccine in preventing damage to the unborn baby from the effects of the mother having German measles, as well as his undertaking early work on the effect of thalidomide in pregnancy. He established the value of congenital abnormality registers and of genetic counselling.

He was a well known teacher and joint author of '*Lecture Notes on Paediatrics*' and as a result of the far reaching excellence of his research he received a number of major national and international awards. This included the International Research Award of the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation in 2000, for his work on the role of folic acid in preventing neural tube defects.

