

Pediatrician, Health Official Arthur J. Lesser Obituary

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By Patricia Sullivan, The Washington Post

Arthur J. Lesser, 95, who devoted his career to the health of children and mothers, died Feb. 23 of pneumonia and congestive heart failure at Sibley Memorial Hospital. He lived in Washington.

Dr. Lesser, a pediatrician who began working for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1941, resigned as director of maternal and child health services with the department's Health Services and Mental Health Administration in 1973 to protest the Nixon administration's budget cuts in the program.

He told the New York Times that the administration was "not interested in the problems of children." He refused a reassignment, and noted that his staff, which concentrated on disabled children and low-income pregnant mothers, would be reduced from 160 to seven.

"Reorganization is the first step in the elimination of categorical programs," he said. "Programs concentrated on people with special problems don't get the attention they deserve. They're not as interested in children's problems in this administration as they were in the past."

Dr. Lesser long had been working on the problems of children and mothers. In 1960, he accepted a prestigious public health award from the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation on behalf of the Crippled Children's Program of the Children's Bureau, for "new comprehensive services of the highest quality for physically handicapped children."

He was on the public health team that traveled to Germany in 1962 to investigate the thalidomide disaster. The drug, used by some pregnant women in Europe and Canada to treat morning sickness, was found to cause severe birth defects including missing or shortened limbs. It was never approved for use in the United States; shortly after the birth defects were observed, thalidomide was banned worldwide.

Dr. Lesser was born in Newark and graduated from Amherst College in Massachusetts in 1930 and from the medical school at Washington University in St. Louis in 1934. He received a master's degree in public health from Harvard University in 1941.

He then joined HEW's Children's Bureau and rose through the ranks. He received HEW's Superior Service Award in 1959 for his work with children's health, its Distinguished Service Award in 1967 for his work with mothers' and children's health and the Martha May Eliot Award from the American Public Health Association in 1965 for his achievements in maternal and child health.

After he left HEW, Dr. Lesser worked for the National Research Council for two years and was a guest lecturer at Harvard University's School of Public Health and was Regents Lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley in 1975.

His wife of 60 years, Edith Lesser, died in 2001.

Survivors include two children, Elisabeth McClain of Arlington and David M. Lesser of New Haven, Conn.; four grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.