

This is an excerpt from a recorded conversation between Dorothy Rice, and ASA President-Elect Fritz Scheuren.

*I had the joy of working for Dorothy at one point in my career. She is one of my heroes: Her service and story should be told in her own words. That's why I interviewed her. She is certainly a person who, in so many ways used, as the ASA mission statement says, our 'discipline to enhance human welfare.' May this article increase the chance that there are many more like her!*

Fritz



## DOROTHY P. RICE

Dorothy Rice is the former director of the National Center for Health Statistics and is now the Professor Emerita at the Institute for Health & Aging and the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco. Her work has focused on examining the health of populations and, in particular, the use, delivery, and cost of health care services; the health status of the population; cost of illness; aging; chronic illness; and health behaviors. Rice is also Director Emerita of the The Dorothy Pechman Rice Center for Health Economics. Established in May of 2000, the center's mission is to train health economics professionals, conduct research, and share the health economics information with professional and nonprofessional audiences. For more information, visit <http://nurseweb.ucsf.edu/iha/rice-ctr.htm>.

“I grew up in Brooklyn, and went to Brooklyn College for a year and a half. My brother, Joe Pechman...got a wonderful fellowship at the University of Wisconsin. The fellowship amounted to \$2,000 and on that he thought we could both live. So he offered me the possibility of coming out to finish my college work at Wisconsin. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. Joe and I looked so much alike when we walked down the street no one mistook us for boyfriend and girlfriend, I was exposed to the greatest people at Wisconsin. I majored in labor economics and Edwin Witte and Selig Pearlman were my professors at the time. I even had courses with Milton Friedman, a course in the mathematics of statistics and business cycles. It was a marvelous experience for me. Joe got his PhD from Wisconsin and we both finished at the same time in June of 1941.

Having been supported by my brother, I really felt I had to go out and make money right away. There was no question in my mind that I wanted to work for the federal government. So I went to Washington [D.C.], actually, before my graduation. That was before World War II started. I got a job at the Railroad Retirement Board at a grade 2 level, I made \$1,260 a year, and I thought I was really something. Soon thereafter, I went to the Department of Labor as an assistant statistical clerk at a grade 3. I think it was \$1,440. Then the war started in December. I think at that time, any female that had anything on the ball really did very well during the war. All the men went to the war and we had to carry on. I was very, very fortunate because I got a job in the War Production Board. That was my first job as a professional at \$2,000 a year. That's where I met my husband, Jim. We both worked in a roller skating rink near the Capitol. They converted this rink into army offices. The head of the division that I worked in at the War Production Board was Bob Nathan. This was absolutely incredible. I was estimating

munition needs. Can you believe that?

[Jim] was working in a different part of the division. He had gotten his master's from the University of North Carolina and had come to Washington to work for the government. We met in 1942 and were married in 1943. He proposed to me over the telephone when he was down south in camp. He was in the service and ... it looked like he might be shipped out; I was all of 20 years old and he was 22. When I look at my granddaughter who is 20, [I think] she shouldn't get married! Anyhow, it looked like he was really going to be shipped overseas. Here I was newly married without a husband, so I joined him in Camp Grant, Illinois. I looked for a job in the army base. I had written in advance and they didn't have anything for me because there really were no research operations at all.

[W]e were rooming with another young army couple and after a day I was convinced I had to get a job because she expected me to do all the work. So I got a job in an munition factory; it was a plumbing factory—downstairs was plumbing, upstairs was munition. I was in the plumbing part. The first job I was given was screwing parts: nuts and bolts. There we were, a group of us, doing nuts and bolts. Putting the bolts on the nuts and I couldn't understand how those people around me could survive doing this every day. I counted by 2s, by 10s, by 8s, by 50s, it was unbelievable. .... I told them I had worked in an office; I never told them what I did. The boss came over to me one day and said, "I hear you worked in a office and my secretary is going on vacation. Would you like to substitute for her?" I said, "I'm sorry, I can't type." I assure you that I went down in their estimation.

You know, I never took typing because I didn't want to be a typist.

Somehow we muddled through that summer. Jim .... was declared "limited service." My good friend, Herb Klarman, got a job working in the army for Ely Ginsberg and they were estimating medical position requirements. Well I called Herb and in no time flat he got Jim transferred to Walter Reed. Jim finished the war in Walter Reed. I came back to Washington and was really lucky. I got a job with the War Labor Board. It was a great job...and it was just the kind of job that I really wanted. We analyzed cases

for wage increase requests and submitted them to the board and the board usually took our recommendations. It was really very exciting and we felt we were contributing to the war effort. The war ended in 1945 and my husband visited Herb and what do you think? Jim got a job working for Ely Ginsberg. In 1947, I went looking for a job elsewhere and got a job in the Hill-burton Program. The Hill-burton Program was really the most exciting program at the time. The Hill-burton Act was enacted in 1946 and in 1947 I was hired... We worked

with the states on their plans for hospital construction. The federal government provided grants for the states and non-profit hospitals to build hospitals and health centers. You know there hadn't been any new hospitals built during the war at all. The problem with that program is that we built too many new small hospitals. They were totally inefficient and most of them became community centers, health centers, or nursing homes. A lot of these were under 100 beds.

In 1949, our first child was born. My husband said it was my decision to continue working and get help or not. So I stayed home. I always knew I'd go back to work, I never took out my retirement. We had three sons. When Tom, our youngest, went into first grade, we'd been involved with PTA, had every position in PTA. I became involved with the League of Woman Voters, wrote papers for them, did a lot of work for the state of Maryland League. My husband said, "Isn't it time you got paid for your work?" I said, "Who would want to hire me?".... With great trepidation, I called Helen Holingsworth. We had lunch and I told her I was interested in coming back to work and she said to me, "How much time do you want? A week, a month?" I said give me a month. So I went back to work in 1960 and at the time I knew that I couldn't work part time. If I was going to work, it had to be full time. So I got



Rice accepting an award from Casper Weinberger, former Secretary of Defense under President Ronald Reagan.



Rice and Wilbur J. Cohen, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Lyndon B. Johnson.

help and she was very good and the kids seemed to like [her]...she was there for the kids when they came home from school. She prepared dinner, left it on the table and went home.



Fritz Scheuren,  
ASA President-  
elect, and  
Dorothy Rice

It was very clear to me very shortly after I came back that this was not a place I wanted to stay in, because the same forms we had designed in 1947 were still being used 11 years later. The person I had worked for, Louis Reed, had moved to Social Security by then and was working in the Office of Research and Statistics directed by Ida Merriam. I went to see him [Reed] and he offered me a job. Merriam was one of my mentors, she was so smart. The first job I was given was to begin looking at the 1962 survey of the aged. It was the first [time] a comprehensive survey of the aged had been done. When the data began coming in 1964, I was given the job of analyzing the health portion of it. That was the first publication on health insurance coverage. It was such an exciting time.

I left the Social Security office in 1976. In 1977 they transferred the division of health insurance to HCFA. That was the beginning of the end of the Office of Research and Statistics. They had a reorganization of Social Security thereafter. Remember when they took all of the divisions that had a name comparable to an operating division and moved them over completely to the divisions.

I moved to NCHS as Director in 1976. I loved my job. Reagan came in 1980 and immediately there were cuts. I had to cut out surveys. I remember cutting out the National Nursing Home Survey and the National Ambulatory Survey became a periodic survey. NORC collected the data for that one.

But let me tell you what my greatest contribution was at NCHS was. It's something people don't really know but which I am very proud of. I approved of the National Death Index. .... My predecessors absolutely refused and I said, "If we

don't do it the National Cancer Institute is going to do it."

It was a very difficult time and we had a reduction in force, RIF. We had vacant positions. We ended up with a dozen people, some of whom may have had a statistics course, literally had one statistics course that made them qualify. We got

people that were totally, unqualified for the jobs. It was a major concern. A few of the new bright young people we had hired were at risk for displacement. Each one had to see me personally and I had a cry with them. Someone cries and I cry with them. It really was just too difficult. I came home one day and said to my husband that I really don't know how I can continue doing this. It was really taking a toll. He said, "I know what you could do. You could retire." I said, "Retire! Who ever heard of that?"

[W]e had already bought a [house] in Berkeley, California. ... I called Phil Lee, The first assistant Secretary of health. .... I told him that I was going to retire...but I wasn't ready to retire. So he said, "I'll see what I can do." His [then] wife, Carol Estes, head of The Institute for Health and Aging; at UCSF invited me to join the department as a Regents' lecturer in 1982. The rest is history. It really has been a wonderful, productive, and challenging time for me. ■

## *Statistician Becomes a Statistic*

**Reprinted from the Washington Post, May 24, 1978**

By Victor Cohn

Dorothy P. Rice, keeper of the nation's health statistics, broke a hip in downtown Washington yesterday and chalked up a new health statistic—a 21-minute wait for a D.C. Fire Department ambulance, by Fire Department log.

Rice, the noted director of the federal government's National Center for Health Statistics, called the wait "at least a half hour, which surprised me very much."

John Norris, editor of the *American Journal of Law and Medicine*, who was with Rice while she waited, said, "In a city like Washington, the response time should be between six and 18 minutes."

James Flynn, Fire Department Communications Director, conceded that "the time was more than average—we usually do better."

"All of our ambulances were busy," he said, and the only one available had just been on four calls "and had to get gas."

"There was no indication that the problem was critical like a heart attack, so we told them to go ahead," Flynn said.

But more ambulances are needed, he said, since "we've been running about 82,000 calls a year with 11 ambulances." He said, "We are getting some, and starting next month we'll run 12 ambulances during the day and 15 from four to midnight, our busiest time."

Rice reported from a bed at George Washington University Hospital that she was "feeling shaken" and "having some pain" but "I guess I'll be all right."

"I just did something very stupid," she said of her accident.

She left her car in a parking garage across from the Mayflower Hotel, the site of a health conference where she was to speak. Then she found she was missing the text of her speech, and went back to her car and tripped on the hard concrete floor.

And the speech wasn't in the car after all, she said, but where she had mistakenly left it at the conference registration desk.

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