

# HELEN RODRÍGUEZ-TRÍAS, M.D.

1921 – 2001



Dr. Helen Rodríguez-Trías wanted to be a physician because medicine “combined the things I loved the most, science and people. I understood that medicine would give me more direct and independent ways to contribute to society, not through organizations or abstract studies, but acting directly on the individual.”  
*National Institutes of Health*

An internationally recognized pediatrician, Dr. Helen Rodríguez-Trías is credited with improving maternal and family health care and public health services for marginalized patients.

After her birth in New York City, Rodríguez-Trías spent her first 10 years in Puerto Rico, until her family returned to New York City in 1939. She earned her medical degree in 1960 from the University of Puerto Rico. While serving her residency at the university hospital, Rodríguez-Trías established the island’s first center for neonatal care.

Returning to New York in 1970, Rodríguez-Trías headed the Department of Pediatrics at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx, where she worked to sensitize her staff to the cultural issues and needs of the Puerto Rican community. She advocated against forced sterilizations of poor women, testified before Congress, and helped draft federal guidelines in 1979 that require a patient’s consent for sterilization.

In 1988, while serving as medical director of the New York State Department of Health’s AIDS Institute, Rodríguez-Trías helped develop critical programs for families affected by HIV.

In 1993, Rodríguez-Trías became the first Hispanic-American woman to serve as President of the American Public Health Association. In 2001, she was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal by President Clinton for her work on behalf of children, women, people living with AIDS, and the poor.



Under the direction of Dr. Helen Rodríguez-Trías, the death rate for newborns at the hospital of the University of Puerto Rico decreased by 50 percent within three years.

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photograph by Jim Hansen for Look magazine.*