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HELEN CALDICOTT

Physician and Activist

Born: August 7, 1938; Melbourne, Australia

Primary Field: Environmental Activism

Affiliation: Nobel Peace Prize

INTRODUCTION

As a pediatrician, Dr. Helen Caldicott has devoted most of her professional life to working with children with cystic fibrosis, the most common genetic childhood disease. As a pediatrician, a mother, and a world citizen consumed with the knowledge that the incidence of congenital diseases and malignancies will increase in direct ratio to the radioactive contaminants polluting our planet, the galvanic Dr. Caldicott has been an environmental activist since the early 1970's, when she led successful campaigns in her native Australia to ban French atmospheric nuclear testing in the South Pacific and Australian exporting of uranium. After taking up permanent residence in the United States, she revived the virtually extinct Physicians for Social Responsibility, an antinuclear coalition that now numbers 20,000 doctors, medical students, and health workers and 12,000 others concerned with "the Final Epidemic."

EARLY LIFE

Dr. Caldicott was born Helen Broinowski in Melbourne, Australia on August 7, 1938 and is of Polish and Irish descent. Her father was Philip Broinowski, a factory manager, and her mother, Mary Mona Enyd (Coffey) Broinowski, an interior designer. She has two younger siblings: Richard, who is the Australian Ambassador to Hanoi, and Susan, a psychologist. Helen Broinowski was educated in public schools except for four years



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at the Fintona Girls School, a Presbyterian secondary school in Adelaide. She was radicalized when, at age fourteen, she read Nevil Shute's book *On the Beach*, the chilling novel about nuclear holocaust set in Australia. Miss Broinowski entered the University of Adelaide Medical School when she was seventeen and graduated six years later, with Bachelor of Medicine and bachelor of surgery degrees, together equivalent to an American M.D. degree. After taking the degrees, she married

William Caldicott on December 8, 1962, and went into general practice in Adelaide. In 1966 she and her husband moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where she had a three-year fellowship in nutrition at Harvard Medical School.

LIFE'S WORK

In 1969 the Caldicotts returned to Adelaide, where Dr. Caldicott joined the staff of the renal unit of Queen Elizabeth Hospital. She had been working at the hospital for six months when she caught hepatitis from a patient by pricking her finger accidentally with a hypodermic needle. "I nearly died," she told an interviewer for *Current Biography*. When she recovered, she "felt she owed the world something." After her recovery, she returned to general practice in Adelaide. Beginning in 1972, she was a resident in pediatrics for one year and an intern in pediatrics for two years at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, where she set up a clinic for cystic fibrosis. At the end of her internship, she passed the membership examination in pediatrics of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

Caldicott's commitment to human survival was inspired in part by her love for her own children and her work with children born with cystic fibrosis, was sparked by the example of Bertrand Russell who she viewed as a man who faced up to the dangers of the atomic age and, despite all odds, dedicated himself to ridding the earth of nuclear weapons. Russell's ban the bomb movement culminated in the International Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty of 1962. When, in 1971, Caldicott learned that France had been conducting atmospheric tests over its small colony of Mururoa in the South Pacific for five years in contravention of the treaty, she was indignant. "I knew that when an atomic bomb explodes near the earth's surface the mushroom cloud that billows into the sky carries particles of radioactive dust. Blown from west to east by stratospheric winds, these particles descend to the earth in rainfall and work their way through soil and water into the food chain, eventually posing a serious threat to human life."

At the time few Australians were aware of the testing and its dangerous fallout, and she decided that it was her duty to educate them. She began by writing a letter to a local newspaper. The letter drew much supportive correspondence, and when France tested its next nuclear device, a television news program director asked her to comment on the medical hazards involved. Over the next few months, France conducted four more

atmospheric tests, and each time she appeared on television and spoke on radio, explaining the dangers of radioactive fallout. She talked about carcinogenic strontium-90 concentrating in milk, especially breast milk, and how babies are twenty times more sensitive to radiation than adults; exposed a confidential government report, passed on to her by a sympathizer in the state government of South Australia, which confirmed that a high level of radiation had been found in South Australian drinking water in 1971; and pointed out that government inspectors in 1972 detected picocuries of radiation in rainwater far in excess of the normal background level of radiation and even of the "safe" maximum arbitrarily established by the International Commission of Radiological Protection.

Dr. Caldicott's television appearances generated a popular movement to stop the French tests. Eminent scientists joined their voices to hers; newspapers backed her warnings with editorials and full pages devoted to angry letters from readers; thousands participated in protest marches in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, and Adelaide; consumers boycotted French perfume and cognac; dockworkers shunned French ships, and postal employees refused to handle French mail. A Gallup poll taken early in 1972 indicated that 75 percent of the population of Australia was opposed to the French tests, and in December 1972 the Australian electorate swept into office the Labor party, who strongly opposed the French testing while the Liberal party had not. In 1973 the newly elected government, together with the government of New Zealand, took France before the International Court of Justice in the Hague. The decision of the court was equivocal, but France bowed to world opinion and agreed to restrict its nuclear testing to underground sites,

The Labor government made it a matter of domestic national policy to rule out nuclear power for energy as well as armaments. Following the international oil embargo of 1974, however, the government offered to sell on the world market Australia's vast supply of uranium, the raw material for virtually all forms of nuclear technology. This time around, Caldicott encountered obdurate complacency regarding the dangers in the "front end" of the nuclear fuel cycle, the mining, milling, and enrichment of uranium, which decays at every step into radioactive byproducts. Because of the balance of payments, the government turned a deaf ear, and radio and television stations withdrew their welcome mat. When she went to the trade unions she remembers being told,

“Okay, you can come talk to the miners, but we need the jobs and you’ll never convince them.” Later she would reflect that, “I would convince them in ten minutes. I just talked about the effect on their testicles and what radiation does to the genes and the sperm, and I’d talk about nuclear war and what it means to their children.” Her efforts resulted in the passage by the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1975 of a resolution not to mine, transport, or sell uranium. The ban lasted from 1975 until 1982. It was overturned, in Dr. Caldicott’s words, “because the multinationals put full-page ads in our papers calling us selfish not to export our uranium to an energy-hungry world.”

The Caldicotts returned to Boston in 1975, when Helen Caldicott became a fellow in cystic fibrosis at the Children’s Hospital Medical Center. They went back to Australia for six months in 1976 and immigrated permanently to the United States in January 1977. In addition to her work in the cystic fibrosis clinic at the Children’s Hospital Medical Center, Caldicott became an associate in medicine there and an instructor in pediatrics at the Harvard Medical School.

Physicians for Social Responsibility had been founded in 1962, when the atomic bomb anxiety pervasive in the American consciousness in the 1950’s had not yet become vestigial. Later, concern over the threat of nuclear holocaust was sidetracked as the American public gave its attention to such matters as political assassinations, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam war. Meanwhile, the Pentagon, in feverish competition with the Soviet Union, was stockpiling more and more nuclear weapons and developing more and more sophisticated delivery systems for them; the commercial nuclear power industry was encouraged to grow recklessly, with farcical regulation, as if the description “peaceful uses of atomic energy” somehow magically solved such unsolved problems as storing and disposing of nuclear waste and evacuating populations in case of meltdown; and the United States’ willingness to export peaceful nuclear reactors opened a frightening vista of nuclear proliferation militarily as well as commercially. By 1978 there were 50,000 nuclear weapons on earth, with a total power several times greater than that necessary to wipe out the population of the planet; 263 nuclear reactors were in operation, each raising the level of background radiation in the ecosphere through mutagenic and carcinogenic leakage and each producing tons of hazardous radioactive waste with life spans of up to 500,000 years or more. As Caldicott wrote in

Nuclear Madness, “nuclear technology stands to inherit the earth.” At the same time, the membership of Physicians for Social Responsibility had dwindled to virtually nothing. Its revival began one day in 1978 at a meeting in the library of Caldicott’s home attended by ten of her colleagues. The revived organization remained a relatively small group of concerned medical specialists until March 28, 1978 when the most serious accident in the history of the American nuclear power industry occurred at the Three Mile Island reactor in Pennsylvania, the damaged core of which came within sixty minutes of a possible meltdown. The accident coincided with the appearance of a Physicians for Social Responsibility advertisement in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. More than 500 physicians joined the organization immediately, and the membership was still growing at the rate of approximately 250 a week three years later, by which time its paid staff had grown to thirty-two and its annual budget to \$1,200,000.

During the Carter Administration, Physicians for Social Responsibility aimed its attack at the nuclear power industry. When the Reagan Administration stepped up the arms race (the Reagan START program, Strategic Arms Reduction Talks is, as Caldicott saw it, “a proposal designed not to work”), PSR turned its attention in that direction, sponsoring, often in collaboration with such other groups as the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Council for a Livable World, symposia and rigorously scientific studies of the nuclear threat, especially the actual impact a nuclear hit would have on populations and the environment. One of the symposia formed the text for the thirty-eight-minute graphic PSR documentary film *Eight Minutes to Midnight*, with which Caldicott toured. *Eight Minutes to Midnight* was nominated for an Academy Award in 1982 but did not win. The following year the National Film Board of Canada’s documentary *If You Love This Planet* (1982) featured Caldicott in one segment exhorting an audience in Plattsburgh, New York to close down the nearby Strategic Air Command base and did win an Oscar. It also displeased the United States Department of Justice, which labeled the film political propaganda and put restrictions on it, requiring a disclaimer and a list of the American organizations that asked to see it. A televised profile of Caldicott, originating on station WGBH/ Boston and televised nationally on the PBS network, was among the forty-four Nova episodes that made the transition to the print medium in the eloquently written and

sumptuously illustrated book *Nova: Adventures in Science* (Addison-Wesley, 1982).

In England in 1980 Caldicott helped to found the Medical Campaign against Nuclear War and the parent oriented Women's Party for Survival, and she assisted in the founding of similar groups in West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Scandinavia. In other trips abroad in the early 1980's she made speaking tours of Australia and New Zealand and took part in memorial ceremonies in Hiroshima, Japan. In a trip to the Soviet Union in 1979, she did not reach the ear of Leonid Brezhnev, but she did manage to speak to his cardiologist. Although she is one of President Ronald Reagan's harshest critics (she is known for stating, "Jimmy Carter was a wolf in sheep's clothing; Ronald Reagan is a wolf in wolf's clothing"), she is the only disarmament advocate ever to have conversed alone with him for more than an hour. It happened in December 1982, after Caldicott spoke to a show business audience at a nuclear freeze fundraiser in Los Angeles. Following her speech, Patti Davis, the President's daughter, approached her and said, "I want you to see my dad. If there's anyone who can change his mind, it's you." The President agreed to the meeting, at his daughter's request, and with only Patti Davis witnessing, Caldicott spent seventy minutes with Reagan. As she pleaded with him to launch an arms limitation initiative with the Soviets, she repeatedly took the President's hand, in her characteristic person-to-person way. "Sometimes he would get uptight," she told Carol Stoker of the *Boston Globe* (July 26, 1983). "As I pushed him, his face would redden, so I'd pull back and listen for a while, then come back. He seemed like a very nice man, except when he's talking about Communists. That's when you see his dark side. He's got a dark side, a big dark side, and it's projected onto an acceptable enemy."

Ironically, Caldicott's success in rebuilding Physicians for Social Responsibility led to her resignation as president of the organization in the summer of 1983. As she has explained, PSR became more cautious as it grew to embrace a wide, diversified membership. Within that membership she was viewed by many moderates as an extreme radical, because of her across-the-board opposition to nuclear power as well as nuclear weaponry in any form. Also, some of the hard headed scientists in the movement could not identify with her emotional style, her "teaching people through love," an application of what she calls "the positive feminine principle" of "nurturing, caring, protective instinct" that is "now coming

to the fore." In addition, a consultant's report had recently recommended that PSR's image be less identified with a single individual. "PSR became more restrictive for me," she explained in the *Boston Globe* interview, "I represented 20,000 doctors, and I had to respect that. More people meant more points of view. But I can't in good conscience change what I think and believe and I can't change the way I express myself." No successor was named immediately, and Caldicott was expected to remain on PSR's board.

In the fall of 1983 Physicians for Social Responsibility planned to concentrate on working for non-partisan public education about arms control issues, while Dr. Caldicott prepared to tour the country campaigning for speedy bilateral nuclear disarmament, beginning with a weapons freeze. She also planned to work more closely with Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament, a Washington lobbying group, founded by her in 1980, that is made up largely of concerned mothers and intends to exploit the "gender gap" created by the Reagan Administration's perceived antifeminism. "I'm going to go to the swing Congressional districts and to the primary states for the 1984 Presidential election," she told a reporter. "I'm not sure I'll endorse a particular Presidential candidate. I want to hold them all accountable to this issue of disarmament. I want to turn the voters on. That's something I can do well. If you don't use it [democracy] you lose it."

In 1980 Caldicott resigned her positions as instructor in pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and associate in the cystic fibrosis clinic at Boston's Children's Hospital Medical Center in order to devote herself fully to "the ultimate form of preventive medicine." A gifted, provocative orator with a contagiously urgent style, a knack for the spontaneous, quotable phrase, and an ability to reach hearts as well as minds, she tirelessly stumped the country, educating the public in the carcinogenic and mutagenic effects of radiation and getting across on a gut personal level her contention "that the power and weapons industry nuclear technology threatens life on our planet with extinction." In the summer of 1983 she reduced her speaking itinerary in order to concentrate on the writing of her second polemical book, *Missile Envy*. The first was *Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do* (Autumn Press, 1978; Bantam Books, 1980), which has become a best-seller in the antinuclear movement.

Caldicott has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and is the recipient of multiple honorary doctoral

degrees. She has received numerous awards in both the USA and in her native Australia. She was recognized by the Smithsonian Institution for being one of the most influential women of the 20th century. She continues to travel between the USA and Australia speaking on nuclear energy, weapons, and power.

PERSONAL LIFE

Helen Caldicott derives her last name from her marriage to William Caldicott, a fellow physician, also a native of Australia, who is director of research in pediatric radiology at Harvard Medical School. Her mission, as she sees it, is to break through the psychic numbing, the manic denial of feelings regarding nuclear danger that drives Americans into irrelevant activities and interests, a phenomenon known to behavioral psychologists studying caged rats as the displacement effect. Because only 1 percent of the people she talks to can even tell her what a strategic weapon is, she uses blackboard diagrams and other visual aids to explain to her audiences around the United States exactly what such things as MX missiles and radioactive isotopes are, what they do, and what a nuclear war would do physically. With her words, she tries to break through the psychological defenses of her listeners, to arouse their moral sense, and put them in touch with their own feelings.

Her family remains her first priority. She and her husband live in the Boston suburb of Newton, Massachusetts. They have three children. The Caldicotts have spent many summers at their cottage in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Their marriage has been rocky and the couple have utilized intensive seminars in an encounter group to learn to develop strength and serenity through meditation and communication. Family

discussions every night after dinner contribute to the present total honesty in their relationship.

Expert at sewing, Caldicott used to make all of her own and her children's clothes, and she still knits. She enjoys doing the family cooking, growing flowers in the backyard, playing the clarinet, painting an occasional oil (her great-grandfather was a famous painter of birds in Australia), and reading. Politically, she questions the appropriateness of the radical label that is often applied to her, pointing out, "I'm a conservative. I'm for conserving lives." Raised an agnostic, and for many years an atheist, she is now a nonsectarian believer in God, a higher force in her that gives her strength and tells her the right thing to do when she prays. Keeping the reality of death, possibly global and certainly personal, before her makes life so much more precious: "To look at the beauty of this country, the beauty of the world is just extraordinary. To look at a baby, to know what that means. I wake up every morning and I thank God that the planet is still here."

FURTHER READING

Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War; If You Love this Planet; A Desperate Passion: An Autobiography; Metal of Dishonor: How Depleted Uranium Penetrates Steel, Radiates People and Contaminates the Environment; The New Nuclear Danger: George W. Bush's Military-industrial Complex; Nuclear Power is Not the Answer; War in Heaven: The Arms Race in Outer Space; Carbon-Free and Nuclear-Free: A Roadmap for U.S. Energy Policy; If You Love this Planet: A Plan to Save the Earth; Loving this Planet; Crisis Without End: The Medical and Ecological Consequences of the Fukushima Nuclear Catastrophe.