The life and career of Dr Elsie Widdowson 1906-2000

Elsie Widdowson, CH, CBE, FRS, DSc, graduated in Chemistry at Imperial College London in 1928, and obtained her PhD on the carbohydrate content of apples in 1931. The turning point in her life came in 1933 when she decided to go to Kings College Hospital to learn about large-scale cooking before starting a dietetics course. A trip to the kitchens brought her into contact with Robert McCance who was analysing plant foods for carbohydrates in order to plan diabetic diets. This led to a scientific partnership that was to last sixty years. It helped shape war time rationing and the British loaf; paved the way for later work on the damage that poor nutrition in childhood does to adult health and provided the core for every nutritional database in use in the world today. Their book The Chemical Composition of Foods became so widely known on its publication in 1940, that with subsequent editions, their names passed into the title, linking them forever with the field they had made their own.

We did not believe that we should use human subjects in experiments that involved any pain, hardship or danger, unless we had made the same experiment on ourselves.

If your results don’t make sense, think and think again! You may have made a mistake or you may have made a discovery. Above all, treasure your exceptions; you will learn most from them.

For seven years prior to her death on June 14th 2000, Elsie Widdowson was the most highly honoured woman scientist in Britain, having been appointed to be a Companion of Honour. She is best known for her work in nutrition, which did not exist as a subject when she started. She has been a chemist, biochemist, a physiologist of plants and animals and medical researcher.

The six editions of McCance and Widdowson's The Composition of Foods. The six editions of McCance and Widdowson's The Composition of Foods became so widely known on publication in 1940, that with subsequent editions, their names passed into the title, linking them forever with the field they had made their own.

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A pioneer in the field of nutrition

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I sometimes think that of all the various aspects of nutrition I have dabbled in, my first venture, on the composition of foods, will be the longest lasting.

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