

Citation

Professor Shirley Lindenbaum

Professor Shirley Lindenbaum is an Australian-born leader in medical anthropology who has made important and enduring contributions to science and medicine. She is an alumna of the University of Melbourne, taking her Bachelor of Arts in 1955. She gained a Master of Arts from the University of Sydney in 1971. She was awarded a Ph.D. Waiver by the City University of New York in 1972 and is currently Professor of Anthropology at that University.

Professor Lindenbaum's research on cholera in Bangladesh and AIDS in the United States has been influential and highly cited. However, she is best known for the critical role she played in solving one of the most challenging medical mysteries of the 20th century-the puzzle posed by kuru.

Kuru was a devastating neurological condition afflicting the Fore people of the New Guinea highlands, killing most women and many children in affected villages during the 1950s and 1960s. The anthropological research of Shirley Lindenbaum, in the early 1960s, helped to solve the kuru puzzle, complementing international scientific research led by American virologist, Carleton Gajdusek.

The Fore themselves thought that kuru was caused by sorcery. Medical scientists (including Gajdusek) searched for an infectious cause. Others speculated about familial inheritance of a lethal gene or about a toxin in local foods. Shirley Lindenbaum and her husband Robert Glasse investigated every aspect of Fore life - the kinship systems, their myths and history, the role of women, child-rearing practices, the social effects of kuru, and sorcery beliefs and treatment concepts. They painstakingly documented the spread of kuru from village to village over periods of many years. Their work was both pioneering and transformative in integrating knowledge from anthropological and medical domains. They concluded that it was the local mortuary practices of endocannibalism (the eating of dead relatives by women and children) that was responsible for the transmission of kuru from person to person. Their anthropological conclusion was later vindicated by Gajdusek's team when kuru was transmitted to primates by the feeding of kuru-affected brain tissues. It was this experimental work, together with transmission of the related Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (CJD) to primates that led to Gajdusek's Nobel Prize award in 1976.

Professor Lindenbaum's kuru research has provided additional lessons for humanity. It has provided a framework for understanding and controlling the more recent epidemic of BSE ('Mad Cow Disease'), spread by feeding of bovine meat meal from diseased animals to young calves, and the human epidemic of variant CJD, transmitted through the consumption of BSE-contaminated meat.

The outbreak of AIDS provoked another public health crisis at the intersection of scientific knowledge and social behaviour. Again, Professor Lindenbaum offered a unique perspective on how the social, political and economic processes affected the global epidemic.

Professor Lindenbaum has been a fierce advocate for others, actively mentoring and nurturing the careers of the next generation of medical anthropologists. She has authored three books, contributed chapters to more than 20, and served as Editor and Associate Editor of the discipline's most prestigious journals including *American Ethnologist*, *Medical Anthropology*, *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry* and the *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

Professor Lindenbaum's work has captured the attention of a generation of scholars and practitioners interested in international health. She is a true pioneer, bridging the gap between anthropology and biomedicine long before multi-disciplinary research was fashionable. Her case-study of kuru was indeed a seminal event in epidemiology and in the development of medical anthropology.

For her original and enduring contribution to our understanding of how social relations inform the epidemiology of disease, Professor Lindenbaum is a worthy candidate for the award of Doctor of Letters *honoriscausa*.