

Obituary: Professor Aileen Plant (1948–2007)

Professor Aileen Plant died in late March 2007 while in Indonesia at a World Health Organization (WHO) meeting on avian influenza. Aileen was the doyenne of communicable disease control in Australia, and through her enthusiasm, good humour and downright common sense inspired many who work in this field, both here and overseas.

Aileen was instrumental in developing many of Australia's training programs and policies for disease control. Among her many roles over the years, some directly affected public health practitioners in NSW, including: working in disease control at NSW Health; teaching in the University of Sydney's Master of Public Health program and collaborating with research up to the time of her death; helping establish the Australian National University's Master of Applied Epidemiology program and being the inaugural Director of that program; and serving as a long-standing member of the Communicable Disease Network of Australia. Aileen also worked extensively on disease control with the WHO, was Professor of International Health at the Curtin University of Technology as well as Deputy Director of the Australian Biosecurity CRC, and held many other positions.

Among her many outstanding achievements, Aileen was among the first in the world to demonstrate that SARS could be controlled. At that time, she took over from the recently deceased Dr Carlo Urbani, who had alerted the world to this new disease and who himself succumbed to it. At great risk from the unknown, Aileen stepped

into his shoes in Hanoi and with her team finally managed to contain the outbreak, inspiring others around the world to get on and win the battle.

Aileen trained and mentored many who now work in the NSW public health network. In her teaching and training roles, she was remarkable for her energy, her kindness and for conveying so vividly her real passion for public health. In 2005, she took time out of her busy schedule to teach public health unit staff and trainee public health officers at a communicable disease workshop at the NSW Department of Health. In March 2007, Aileen taught at an Advanced Disease Outbreak Workshop in Newcastle and – only days before her untimely death – she participated in the 2007 Communicable Disease Control conference in Canberra. She attended her last WHO meeting in Jakarta despite feeling unwell before leaving Australia. She paid the ultimate price for her dedication and unwillingness to let down the side.

Aileen made a remarkable personal contribution to public health in Australia and beyond, as well as helping to build the careers of many others. She shaped the landscape of communicable disease control in Australia, and it will be an emptier landscape without her. Her funeral was testament to how much she was respected and loved, packed to standing room only, with tearful people from all over Australia and the world.

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