

Selma Dritz

Epidemiologist who charted the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco



JERRY TELFER/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/CORBIS

Selma Dritz is a name that could have been ripped from the pages of a hardboiled detective novel by Dashiell Hammett. But hers was a true story reflecting the noir grit of a more recent time: the early days of the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco.

Selma Dritz was in her 50s when she joined the San Francisco Department of Public Health in 1968 as an infectious disease epidemiologist. Her introduction to the city's gay community, then one of the largest and most open in the world, began with an explosion of amoebic dysentery.

Rates of the parasitic infection had grown to 50 times those of the city as a whole, spread by oral-anal contact known as "rimming." Her education in the sexual mores of the community was eye opening. She combined that knowledge with non-judgmental professionalism to pioneer educational efforts and pleas for safer sexual practices.

"*Pneumocystis Pneumonia—Los Angeles.*" This innocuously sounding paper announced the birth of HIV/AIDS on 5 June 1981 in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*.

Dritz had already reported her own cluster of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Soon she would also be tracking Kaposi's sarcoma and cytomegalovirus. The three were rare, frightening, deadly diseases previously seen only in elderly and severely immunocompromised patients; now they were striking and killing seemingly healthy single young men. The epicentre was the Castro district, the heart of San Francisco's gay community.

Dritz scrounged a blackboard from the department and began to record cases of the surprising diseases. She used techniques first devised by John Snow in the 1854 Broad Street cholera outbreak, and shoe leather that would have done Dashiell Hammett's detective Sam Spade proud. But her most valuable assets were her knowledge of the gay community and its sexual practices, and the trust they had in her.

Slowly those interviews allowed her to draw the sexual networks of the dying patients. Within a year she traced the connections between 44 cases in New York, San Francisco, southern California, and Canada of what was then known as gay related immunodeficiency disease (GRID). It was the foundation of an epidemiological understanding of the disease.

She was the first to identify Burkitt's lymphoma as an AIDS defining condition, and led the way in linking transmission of the virus through blood donations. Her view of gay bathhouses as "cesspools of infection" was instrumental in having them closed in San Francisco.

"I tried to make it clear that my job was to stop this disease, and I didn't care what they did in bed, in the bushes, or anywhere else. My job was simply to see that they didn't get sick," she later told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

She retired from the health department in April 1984, just as the viral cause of the epidemic was being announced.

The early days of the epidemic were captured by Randy Shilts in his book *And the*

Band Played On. In 1993 it was turned into a film, shown on American television as a miniseries and in cinemas worldwide. Comedienne and actress Lily Tomlin played Dritz.

"On first glance, Selma seemed to be a character actress from a 1940s movie. She was quintessentially San Francisco," recalls Donald Abrams, who was at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Kaposi's sarcoma clinic, and a founding member of what would become the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, when the epidemic broke.

"It became clear very soon that she was a competent and compassionate woman who really cared about each patient, not as a number but as a human being. She was a charter member of the Community Consortium [a UCSF effort to improve the care of patients with HIV infection] and continued to support our activities long after she left her role in the city government."

Martin Delaney, founder of the HIV patient education charity Project Inform, said Dritz's "work was critical in those early years, and we all listened carefully to anything she said or did about the suddenly growing caseload of people with the new disease.

"She was one of the very few people that was trusted by everyone: physicians, researchers, activists, and the media alike. It was unusual in those days for any of us in the gay community to trust what we were hearing from the public health department, but even those who saw the department as a threat viewed her as a friend."

One flashpoint was the decision by the health department to close the gay bathhouses. "That created hostility toward the department but Dr Dritz was still trusted and respected. It was clear to everyone that she had no motive other than caring about the sick," said Delaney.

Dritz was born in Chicago and was devoted to music. She was a concert pianist before attending medical school at the University of Illinois, later, in 1967, earning a masters degree in public health at the University of California Berkeley. She is survived by a son, two daughters, and two grandchildren.

Bob Roehr

Selma Dritz, infectious disease epidemiologist, San Francisco Department of Public Health (b Chicago 1917; q Illinois 1941, MPH), d 3 September 2008.

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John Andrew Carron Brown

Former consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, Norwich (b 1925; q Middlesex Hospital, London, 1949; FRCOG, FRCS), d 27 May 2008.

Appointed consultant in Norwich in 1963, John Andrew Carron Brown (“JCB”) developed local maternity and gynaecological services and specialised in gynaecological malignancy, as well as holding weekly operating sessions at Cromer and District Cottage Hospital until he retired in 1990. A member and chair of the regional medical advisory council, he also chaired the hospital staff and planning committees. His other contributions included being regional lead for the confidential enquiry into maternal deaths, examiner for Cambridge and Birmingham Universities and the Central Midwives’ Board, and an active member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. He leaves a wife, Sue; six children; and 16 grandchildren.

Richard Warren

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David Wilfried Levy



Former consultant physician in geriatric medicine Royal Bolton Hospital (b 1927; q Cape Town 1950; FRCP), d 9 September 2008.

David Wilfried Levy spent his earlier professional years at Grootte Schuur Hospital, Cape Town, and later as a consultant physician at Port Elizabeth, where he set up and led a community peritoneal dialysis service. With many other liberals, he left South Africa in 1978, and came to Manchester, soon becoming senior lecturer in geriatrics. In 1981 he became consultant in Bolton, retiring in 1992. He cowrote *Acute*

Geriatric Medicine and played a regular part in various charitable and other professional activities outside his work. He leaves a wife, Shirley, and three children.

Arup Banerjee

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Michael Myers



Former general practitioner Southend on Sea, Essex (b 1931; q St Thomas’ Hospital, London, 1958; DObstRCOG), died from metastatic oesophageal carcinoma on 16 July 2008.

Called up for national service in 1950, Michael Myers deferred his medical school place to join the Royal Air Force and was one of the few national servicemen to be offered conversion to jet fighters. He stayed a further six months to fly the RAF’s first jet fighter, also winning the Fighter Command 440 yards and playing rugby for the command. In 1964 he moved to Southend, where he built a modern, efficient unit from a struggling singlehanded practice before retiring in 1997. He continued to enjoy locum work until the week before his diagnosis in June 2008. He leaves a wife, Rita; five children; and nine grandchildren.

Jonathan D Myers

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Roger Baron Pickford

Consultant radiologist Nevill Hall Hospital, Abergavenny (b 1945; q Birmingham 1970; DMRD, FRCP), died from unsuspected idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy on 18 August 2008.

Roger Baron Pickford (“Rog”) was profoundly deaf, but this did not deter him from being a high achiever. After house jobs, he joined the West Midlands radiology



was named after him in July 2008. He leaves a wife, Raynah; three children; and five grandchildren.

Sunil Pinto

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Michael William Reece

Former consultant surgeon Plymouth (b 1925; q St Thomas’ Hospital, London, 1948; FRCS), died from prostate cancer on 29 August 2008.

After national service in the Royal Air Force, Michael William Reece trained as a surgeon in Leicester and Sheffield. After working as a registrar in Bristol, he was appointed surgeon in Plymouth, where he worked until his retirement in 1989 as one of the last of the truly general surgeons. He was a member of Plymouth Hospitals Management Committee and instrumental in helping to combine the previous separate hospitals under one roof as Derriford Hospital. Notorious for his irascible theatre technique, he always cared passionately for the welfare of his patients. He spent his last years caring for his wife, Paddy, whom he leaves, as well as two children and six grandchildren.

Nick Whitehead

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Christopher Patrick Sames

Former consultant general surgeon Bath Clinical Area (b 1912; q St Mary’s Hospital, London, 1937; MS, FRCS), died from heart failure on 3 January 2008.

After three years’ apprenticeship in the London fur trade, Christopher Patrick Sames (“Patrick”) entered medical school aged 20. He became FRCS in 1939 and was recruited into the Emergency Medical Service, dealing with the victims of Dunkirk and the London Blitz. In 1945 he was conscripted to the Royal Army Medical Corps as a surgical specialist for two years in Nigeria, becoming assistant director of the professorial surgical unit at St Mary’s on his return. In Bath he developed interests in coloproctology. Predeceased by his first wife in 1970, he leaves his second wife, Eleanor, and four children from his first marriage.

John Kirkup

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training scheme, eventually transferring to King’s College Hospital, London, as a senior registrar, where he developed the ultrasound service for Professor Roger Williams’ liver unit. In Abergavenny he set up a highly regarded adult and paediatric echocardiography service. He also served as trust clinical tutor and specialty college tutor. An active member of the British Medical Ultrasound Society and the BMA, he set up a charity to provide medical ultrasound services to rural areas of Southern Ethiopia. He did not have any children.

Frank Williams

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Robin Trevor Pinto



Consultant psychiatrist Bedfordshire and Luton Partnership Trust (b 1939; q Jabalpur, India, 1961; MPhil, FRCP, FRCPsych), died from a heart attack on 25 April 2008.

An outstanding student and national badminton finalist in India, Robin Trevor Pinto came to Britain in 1965 and trained at the Maudsley. Appointed a consultant at 31, he had the largest patient catchment area in the country of a sector psychiatrist. He was the first medical director of the trust, in recent years becoming frustrated at changes in service provision. Later he enjoyed a role in the Criminal Injury Compensation Board, jousting with Cherie Blair in her barrister role. The psychiatric unit where he worked