Born in the hills of Westmoreland, her heart was touched at an early age by the sick children from poorer homes in the district where she lived, who were dying from what people called Marasmus, an incurable disease. Alternatively, it was alleged that a ghost was sucking their strength.

Dr. Cicely Williams began her medical studies at the age of twenty and graduated from Oxford University with a Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery in 1923. Little did she know that this would lead her into a distinguished medical career, caring for the health of mothers and children and, at a time when prejudice against professional women was widespread, she would become the first among women in her field. She was the first woman to be appointed by in the British Colonial Medical Service to be sent to Gold Coast (now Ghana), the first foreigner to receive the Joseph Goldberg Award of the American Medical Association, the first to receive the Order of Merit and the first woman to receive the Ceres Medal, an honour bestowed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for service of the highest order to mankind. In addition, she became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, and a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George.

The medical symptoms of swollen bellies, diarrhea and vomiting which she had noticed in the hills of Westmoreland were also evident in the
Gold Coast when she went there. In studying the problem and its possible causes, Dr. Cicely Williams discovered that a diet rich in protein could reverse the condition and thus leading to a dramatic decline in the death rate. She announced to the world that the problem was protein-calorie malnutrition and she named the disease Kwashiorkor, the African term used to characterise the illness. It was one of the greatest discoveries in the twentieth century, for it has saved the lives of countless numbers of children and has been of tremendous significance for the poorer countries.

While subsequently serving in Singapore during World War II, she was captured and imprisoned by the Japanese. She was able to use the same knowledge of protein deficiency to treat her fellow prisoners and so to keep the death rate much lower than in other camps. When she was released, badly malnourished, she returned to Jamaica in 1946 to recover from the effects of her imprisonment, and very soon became involved in other pioneering work.

She was appointed a member of a team that was looking for a cure for ‘vomiting sickness’ caused by Ackee (*Blighia Sapida*) poisoning, particularly in children. It was recognised that the poisoning was due to a chemical in the Ackee known as hypoglycin which led to a dramatic fall in blood sugar levels. She helped to develop a simple sweet drink treatment that saved thousands of lives.

During her lifetime, Dr. Williams served in 58 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and lived to see women respected and accepted as physicians and as lecturers in universities. She died in 1992.
The Government of Jamaica is pleased to recognise the pioneering work and splendid achievements of the late Honourable Dr. Cicely Delphine Williams and to award her posthumously THE NATIONAL MEDAL FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY.

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