

Biography of Sarah E. Stewart

Sarah Elizabeth Stewart was born in Tecalutlan, Jalisco, Mexico in 1906. In 1927 she received a B.S. degree from New Mexico State University, majoring in home economics and science. She worked for a time as a bacteriologist in the Colorado Experiment Station. She received an M.S. degree from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1930, and then from the University of Colorado School of Medicine in Denver. She went as a bacteriologist to the United States Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, Washington, DC, in 1935, interrupting her service to take a Ph.D. in microbiology in 1939 at the University of Chicago, where her sister Laura was a graduate student at the time. In 1944 Dr. Stewart left the USPHS to study at Georgetown University for an M.D., which she obtained in 1949, the first woman to do so from that institution. She served her internship at USPHS Hospital, Staten Island, NY, returning in 1951 to the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, MD, as an officer in the Commissioned Corps in the USPHS Hospital, where she later became a Medical Director. She continued her research there until 1971, when she retired from USPHS and returned to Georgetown University School of Medicine as a professor of pathology. The illness that finally took her life sharply curtailed her activities in later years, and in 1974 she moved to New Smyrna Beach, FL, to be near her two sisters residing there. She died on December 6, 1976.

Sarah Stewart was a pioneer in viral oncology, developing an interest in the viral etiology of cancer when it was a very unpopular concept. She persevered despite early rejections of her proposals—the Microbiology Laboratory of NIH where she worked was not interested in cancer research in the late 1930's, and the National Cancer Institute was not interested in viruses. After adding an M.D. to her name (1949) she returned to NCI to take up investigation of viral oncology. In 1953 she discovered the polyoma virus, which she and Dr. Bernice Eddy succeeded in growing in tissue culture (1958). The SE (for Stewart-Eddy) polyoma virus was found to cause many kinds of tumors in mice and other rodents. Non-infectious to humans, the virus has served as a research tool in efforts to understand causes of cancer and its prevention. She was awarded many prizes, honorary degrees, and honorary memberships for her contributions to science and medicine.

(Taken from the obituary in the Spring 1978 Bulletin, credited to Elizabeth M. O'Hern. First printed in the Winter 1980-1981 Bulletin.)

[back to top](#)

[back to history main page](#)