

KAREN DAVIS DCL

Mr Chancellor,

Dr Karen Davis has dedicated her life to one, very simple mission: addressing inequalities of health care. Her aim is for all people to obtain the health care they need, whatever their background. She has tirelessly spent over 40 years pursuing this ambition, long before taking on her current role as President of the Commonwealth Fund. One could argue that her entire career was pathway towards this role, which appears to be tailor made for her. It is a perfect match - and this is why she has been so effective.

The Commonwealth Fund is a charitable foundation that was established in 1918 by Anna Harkness. Anna, the wife of one of the original Standard Oil investors, was charged with a mandate to "do something for the welfare of mankind". She founded the organization with an initial endowment of \$10 million dollars, a fund that was enhanced by her son Edward to reach more than \$50 million dollars in 1960, and today is over \$600 million.

The Fund is now one of the major philanthropic foundations in the United States today, and is notable for being one of the few established by a woman. Over the years, it has given support to medical schools and to the building of hospitals and clinics in rural areas. For example, in New York City, the Harkness

family and the Commonwealth Fund were a major contributor to the building of Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center of the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

In recent years, Karen Davis has developed strong collaborative links between the Commonwealth Fund and international organisations with a similar aim, including the Nuffield Foundation here in the United Kingdom. This has extended the influence of the Fund overseas, most notably through the sponsorship of Harkness Fellows, which include several leading figures shaping our National Health Service today.

Dr Karen Davis is the embodiment of The Commonwealth Fund. Its president since 1995, she is spearheading the campaign for better access and quality of health care for the most vulnerable in society, especially those on a low-income, the uninsured, minority Americans, young children, and elderly adults. This would be a challenge here in the United Kingdom, where we have a state funded health care system, free at the point of need. But the Commonwealth Fund is based in the United States, which presents particular challenges. Moreover, the Fund has a global mission, to stimulate innovative health delivery policies and practices across the world.

With this in mind, you might expect Karen Davis to be primarily a politician, but nothing could be further from the truth. Dr Davis has solid academic credentials. A graduate in

Mathematics and Economics, she is now an internationally recognised health-economist, with a distinguished career in public policy research. Born in the American mid-west, she obtained her PhD in 1969 at Rice University, Houston, Texas, with a thesis entitled “A Theory of Economic Behavior in Nonprofit, Private Hospitals”, thus laying the foundations for her current role over three decades later.

Her early career was in academia, with appointments at Rice, The Brookings Institute, and Harvard University. However, Karen is not a mere theoretician. She is a woman who (in the words of close colleagues) “likes to get things done”, and in order to make a real difference, she realised early on that she had a responsibility to influence US Government policy.

Charged with her academic base, she embarked on a government career in Washington D.C., in the Office of the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Her inner energy is immediately apparent to all who come into contact with her, and during her time in Government she continued to publish significant books, monographs and articles on health and policy issues (over 200 in all), alongside an even greater number of influential official reports, intermingled with media communications and editorials for health care journals. These are well-constructed documents specifically aimed at changing the direction of health care policy

through rigorous evidence-based argument. This approach characterises Karen Davis's style.

Before joining The Commonwealth Fund, Karen was the Chairman of the Department of Health Policy and Management with a joint appointment as Professor of Economics at Johns Hopkins University, and has received several awards of international significance for her contribution to patient-centred health care. She has a sharp eye for “policy windows” which cast small “chinks of light” on the future, illuminating potential avenues for reform. She has unique foresight, enabling the preparation of robust influential arguments well in advance of the private and public debates. Armed with this fuel, she and her team are deeply embroiled in the current transatlantic discussion crystallised by President Obama's proposed health care reforms. This is arguably the greatest opportunity for health care reform in over 15 years, and Karen Davis is at the cutting-edge, exploring the practicalities of moving the current US healthcare system to a point where it can provide health care for the whole population.

And what is the evidence that her approach works? Well, her 2003 paper “Creating Consensus” provided the intellectual underpinning for major reforms in Massachusetts, which is the only US state with a healthcare system approaching universal coverage. This is an exemplar for the entire Union of 50 states, and provides real hope for the future.

Despite her prominent position in Government, she has not been afraid to tackle thorny topics through incisive books including “Health Care Cost Containment”, the “National Health Insurance: Benefits, Costs and Consequences”, and “Health and the war on Poverty”. These are emotive topics, but her sense of what is “right” is not purely based on an inner ethical stance. Rather, a scientific analysis of the facts and a clear solution, is what makes her contribution so valuable. Her unique style forces us all – public and politicians – to realise the gravity and immediacy of these issues, and at the same time, show us that we can *actually* do something about them. Not surprisingly she has a major role in several Government organisations, including the Panel of Health Advisors for the U.S. Congressional Budget Office.

Despite the magnitude of the task ahead, Karen Davis is unwaveringly optimistic. She has an immense capacity for hard work, and strives for excellence in all that she does. She inspires and energises her team at the Commonwealth Fund to do “more, better, and faster”. But at the same time she is warm, honest and a person of huge integrity. Her team is therefore firmly behind her.

Mrs Harkness can rest assured that the Commonwealth Fund is doing far, far more than “something for the welfare of mankind”. Karen Davis embodies Mrs Harkness’ aspiration, and we can be in no doubt that, with Karen Davis at the helm,

world-wide equity in healthcare will move closer, and faster than ever before.

Mr Chancellor, in recognition of the outstanding contribution made by Karen Davis to health and social policy issues on a global scale, touching the lives of many millions in all four corners of the globe, I now ask that you bestow upon her the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery