

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0283

Cahn, Audrey Josephine

(1905 - 2008)

Born	19051017, Parkville Victoria Australia
Died	20080401, Hughes Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Dietician, Lecturer, Microbiologist, Servicewoman

Summary

Audrey Cahn was the first woman to complete the newly established agriculture degree at the University of Melbourne in 1928. Born to parents who were influential scientists themselves, she developed a life long interest in the field of nutritional science and went on to pioneer the academic field of dietetics. Regarded in the 1950s and 60s as a 'soft science' by the then university's head of biochemistry, Victor Trikojus, Cahn fought a long battle for respect, one in which she was eventually supported by major funding bodies such as Nicholas Pty Ltd (Aspro).

Her research output in the field of nutritional biochemistry is well respected. Some of her studies undertaken during her time at the University of Melbourne (1947-68) included examining the physical properties and energy value of common dietary foods, so that she could compile calorie tables. She was an early proponent of the need to reduce fat intake and to substitute polyunsaturated fatty acids for saturated fats. With colleagues in the anatomy department, she participated in a 17-year longitudinal study of "Child Growth in Melbourne (1954-71)". The study was compared with similar studies in the United States and Britain and found that Australian children were overweight and inactive compared with their peers elsewhere.

Cahn enjoyed a very long life, thanks, she said, to a combination of good luck and good genes.

Details

The daughter of Professor W A and Ethel Osborne (nee Goodson) Audrey Cahn was born in 1905. Her father came to Melbourne University in 1903 to take up the Chair of Physiology, Biochemistry and Histology. Her mother, who received a BSc and MSc from Leeds University, worked for the Victorian State Government examining the conditions of women in various trades. Her work led her to develop an interest in the sociological aspects of medicine and she undertook further study towards a medical degree at the University of Melbourne. She was instrumental in setting up the first Dietetics School in Victoria, at St Vincent's Hospital.

Audrey completed her secondary education at Merton Hall Grammar School for Girls (now know as the Church of England Girls' Grammar School) and matriculated in 1922. She then enrolled in an Agriculture Degree at Melbourne University from which she graduated in 1928. The next year she took a position as a Microbiologist and Food Analyst with Kraft. In 1930 Audrey married Leslie Cahn, an architect, and they bore twin daughters. The marriage did not survive.

Audrey completed a Hospital Certificate of Dietetics at the newly opened Dietetics Unit at St. Vincent's Hospital. Before leaving she rose to the post of Chief Dietician at the hospital. She then took a position at Kraft/Walker and Cheese Factory in Drouin as a microbiologist. Employment as the first Chief Dietician for the Victorian Mental Hygiene Department followed, before spending a year at the Royal Perth Hospital.

During World War II, Audrey Cahn enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Women's Service on 11 February 1943. As part of the Australian Army Medical Corps she became Chief Dietician at the Heidelberg Military Hospital. Before her discharge on 13 September 1946 Audrey had obtained the rank of Major.

After the war, Audrey obtained a position as Lecturer (1947) and then Senior Lecturer (1959) in Nutrition and Applied Dietetics. Audrey Cahn retired in 1968 after spending 21 years at the university.

Published resources

Resource Section

CAHN, AUDREY JOSEPHINE, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2002,
<http://www.wv2roll.gov.au/script/veteran.asp?ServiceID=A&VeteranID=516023>

Article

Starched white dress and the hissing of gaslights: early cloisters life, Tester, Julie, 1998,
<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/ExtRels/Media/UN/archive/1998/331/starchedwhitedress.html>

Resource

Where are the Women in Australian science?, Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre, 2003,
<http://www.austehc.unimelb.edu.au/wisa/wisa.html>

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Newspaper Article

A scientist ahead of her times, Tilley, Leann and Bruce Stone, 2008,
<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/a-scientist-ahead-of-her-times/2008/05/11/1210444243844.html>

Archival resources

The University of Melbourne Archives

[Cahn, Audrey](#)

Author Details

Anne Heywood and Nikki Henningham

Created 6 February 2002

Last modified 26 April 2026