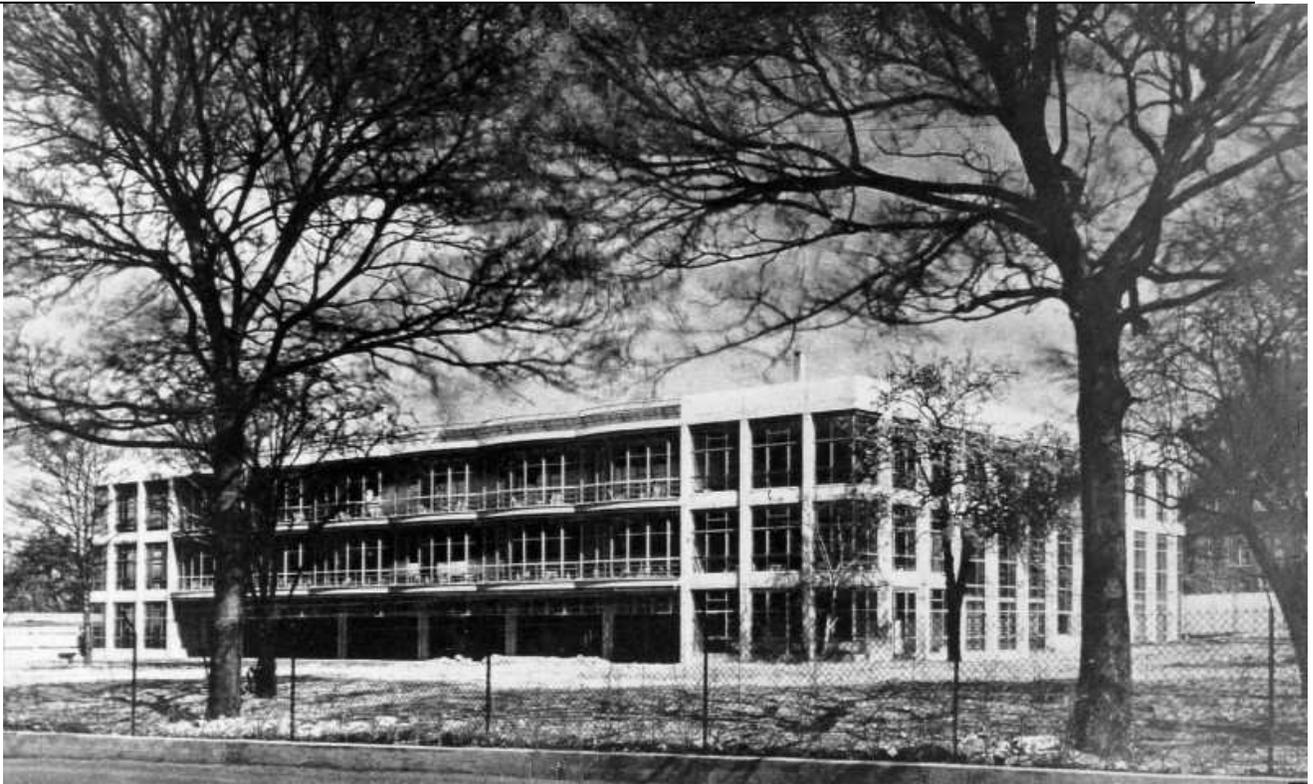


# The Peckham experiment: An Introduction

*Arati Karnik, MD*



*“Health is everyone’s birthright; the pity is that so many lose it. In spite of our vast sickness services...the burden of ill-health in the community remains heavy...all this study of disease does not reveal to us the laws of health. It is health itself which must be studied. We must devise laboratories where we can put health, too, under a lens, look at it, discover how it behaves, and find out in what conditions it can grow and spread.”*

*From Health of The Individual,  
of the Family, of Society*

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The Peckham Experiment was one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most innovative programs in community medicine, influencing the community health movement around the world. It was the brainchild Dr. George Scott Williamson and Dr. Innes H. Pearse, two medically trained biologists who were also a married couple. Both were researchers with experience in the early diagnosis and investigation of disease, and yet they came to the conclusion that studying disease was not the route to attaining or understanding health. In a world that focuses mostly on pathological processes and curing diseases, the Peckham Experiment and its founders were innovative and brave in their thinking. The idea was to study health through the family unit – and not just to study health, but what is perceived to promote a healthy life – when there is mutual interface

between people, their families, other families, and their environment.

The experiment began in 1926 in a small house located in a diverse community that represented a cross-section of the wider population in south London. A “family club” was created to monitor the effects of early treatment of diseases. After a few years, Scott Williamson and Pearse decided to create a larger communal space with greater opportunities for self-nurturing and development. In May 1935 after years of fundraising and planning, the Pioneer Health Center designed to accommodate 2000 families opened its doors. The Center itself was conceptualized as an instrument of health in its architectural functional design. It was designed to be a space that promoted and fostered healthy interactions, namely physical activity and social communications. While initially received with a hugely positive response, the Center was forced to close in 1939 due to the outbreak of World War II. Members of the Center rallied to re-open it post-war. But while Scott Williamson and his staff continued lecturing on the concept of positive health and preventive measures, the next decade saw the birth of the National Health Service and with it, a refocusing of health care goals. Once again, health was being defined by lack of disease rather than promotion of health. The Peckham Experiment did not fit in with the policies and goals of the Ministry of Health: Peckham was concerned primarily with the health of an integrated family (rather than the individual), was a local project (as opposed to being open to everyone), required financial contributions by members and was autonomous from the government system being put in place. Due to lack of funding and national backing, the Pioneer Health Center closed its doors for good in 1950.

The publications reprinted here provide an introduction to the Peckham Experiment and what it was seeking to discover and study. The first is a book review from the British Medical Journal in 1980 of *The Quality of Life: the Peckham Approach to Human Ethology* by Innes Pearse. In reviewing the book, the author recounts the core principles of the Peckham Experiment and how they drove this biological study of human behavior and health. The second, *Health of the individual of the family of*

*society*, was published in 1971 by the Pioneer Health Centre. It describes the Peckham Experiment and future possibilities related to this work. It recounts the genesis of the experiment, the underlying philosophies driving the center, and described the functioning of the center along with its initial findings. The third and final piece is an introduction written by Dr. Joel Elkes for the republication in 1985 of *The Peckham Experiment*, originally published in 1943. Dr. Elkes takes a historical perspective as someone who first saw the Pioneer Health Centre as a medical student and relates the concept of studying health through a more lens. All three publications reveal the ethos of the Peckham Experiment and the Pioneer Health Centre.

### For More Information

Although the Pioneer Health Center closed in 1950, the charitable organization that created the Peckham Experiment continues as the Pioneer Health Foundation Ltd. The Foundation continues to promote the ideas of George Scott Williamson and Innes Pearse, sharing lessons learned from the Experiment and encouraging further research into the nature of health and social conditions. More general information on the work of the Pioneer Health Foundation can be found at their website: <http://www.thephf.org> In addition, the Wellcome Library<sup>1</sup> has archival material about the Pioneer Health Centre.

Every year the Pioneer Health Foundation has an essay contest in honor of Mary Langman, personal assistant to Dr. George Scott Williamson who helped found the Peckham Experiment. The essay must apply principles of the Peckham Experiment to relevant issues today – registration for the contest is by October 30, 2009 and deadlines for submission are January 1, 2010. For details about the essay contest and the cash prize go to their website.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, a reading list about the Pioneer Health Center can be found on the website of the Mary Langman prize.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.marylangmanprize.org.uk/home>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.marylangmanprize.org.uk/reading-list>

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