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In Memoriam

Robert Katzman, MD



His colleagues, students, and patients mourn the passing of Robert Katzman, MD, Professor Emeritus of Neurosciences at the University of California, San Diego and pioneering Alzheimer's disease (AD) scientist and patient advocate, who died on September 16, 2008 after a long illness. His productive scientific career ranged from the neurochemistry of spinal fluids and electrolytes to neuroepidemiology, but he will be best remembered for his research, teaching, patient care, and public advocacy in the fight against AD and related disorders. Over four decades, Katzman focused his efforts on AD and other age-associated dementias, and with his deceptively quiet style, he succeeded in recruiting and educating a cadre of scientists and clinicians to join the effort. He will be remembered for his intellectual rigor, extraordinary integrity, and charming grace as a scientist, mentor, and colleague.

Robert Katzman was born on November 29, 1925 in Denver, Colorado. After serving in the Navy in the

Pacific theater during World War II, he attended the University of Chicago on the GI Bill where he received his undergraduate degree. In 1953, he graduated cum laude from Harvard Medical School and completed a residency in Neurology at the Neurological Institute, Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York (1957) before joining the faculty of the Department of Neurology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. In 1964, he became Chair of the department and served until 1984, when he was recruited to serve as Chair of the Department of Neurosciences at the University of California, San Diego.

Katzman began his research career at Harvard Medical School where he studied the movement of potassium ions from blood to brain and was a co-recipient of the Borden Undergraduate Research Award (1953), but his research direction changed dramatically at Einstein in the early 1970s.

When Katzman was in training to be a neurologist, AD was defined as a presenile dementia – onset before age 65 – and considered to be a rare disorder. In the 1960s, dementia due to normal pressure hydrocephalus was described and Katzman began clinical-pathological studies of these patients, but it turned out that the majority of these patients actually had AD. It became apparent to him that AD affected older persons, was not rare, and, in fact, was a major and growing public health problem.

At Einstein, Katzman met Robert Terry, MD, a neuropathologist who had been working on AD since 1960. Terry notes that he had begun doing AD research first, but it was Katzman who made it take off. Together, Katzman and Terry became a team dedicated to the understanding and eradication of AD. They also became lifelong friends, and tennis partners, who moved together to UCSD in 1984. At Einstein, Katzman recruited, trained, and collaborated with many scientists in the study of AD. Leon Thal, who left his own legacy in AD research, was at Einstein as a resident, post-doctoral

fellow, and eventually a rising faculty member and AD researcher, mentored by Bob. So was I. People who began working with Bob found it difficult to imagine working without him.

In a 1976 editorial entitled “The Prevalence and Malignancy of Alzheimer’s Disease” [1], Katzman redefined AD as the most frequent progressive dementia during aging. This 2-page editorial launched Katzman’s role as a staunch AD research and patient advocate, and became one of the most frequently cited references in the AD literature. With Terry and Katherine Bick, he organized a 1977 conference on AD that was sponsored by three National Institutes of Health (NIH) institutes. By 1979, groups of AD family members agreed on the formation of the organization that eventually became the Alzheimer’s Association. Bob was an activist at all levels. In part due to his influence, federal funding for AD research grew from \$5 million in 1980 to more than \$300 million dollars in 1996.

Pioneering AD researcher and close friend, David A. Drachman, MD, Professor of Neurology at the University of Massachusetts, noted, “His key goal was that everyone must have heard of AD, if we were to understand and defeat it. It was not that any one individual researcher could be expected to find the cure, or the underlying cause; but like a pyramid, in order to raise the peak of it by a foot, you would have to build a huge infrastructure – and Bob proceeded to do just that”.

At UCSD, Bob’s efforts and energy only grew. Soon after his arrival, Katzman, Terry, and their new UCSD colleagues secured funding for one of the first NIH-funded Alzheimer Disease Research Centers. Katzman held the Florence Riford Chair for Research in Alzheimer’s Disease at UCSD from 1984–1995, and continued to recruit scientists to the field and to dedicate his efforts toward improving the outlook for patients with AD. “His work helped bring UC San Diego to the forefront of medical research into Alzheimer’s disease,” said Doris Trauner, MD, Professor and interim Chair of the Department of Neurosciences. “He was instrumental in attracting world-renowned neuroscientists to the program, in addition to having a tremendous impact on the understanding of Alzheimer’s disease.”

I was privileged to be a part of Bob’s pyramid, along with many, many others at Albert Einstein, UCSD, throughout the United States, China, and abroad. Bob was a valued colleague and thoughtful mentor to many scientists, physicians, and researchers, a compassionate physician to many patients and caregivers, and a leader to the entire field of AD research and care. His thoughtfulness and extraordinary integrity were noted by all who had the pleasure of contact with him.

Although Bob was a quiet man, his words were highly valued. In his extraordinary career, he served in many capacities, received numerous awards, and published more than 300 scholarly papers. He served on the Advisory Council of the National Institute of Aging from 1982–1985; and was President of the American Neurological Association in 1985–1986. Among his honors and awards were election to the Institute of Medicine in 1983, the Henderson Memorial Award from the American Geriatric Association (1986), the George W. Jacoby Award from the American Neurological Association (1989), the Potamkin Prize for Research in Pick’s, Alzheimer’s and Related Diseases from the American Academy of Neurology (1992), the Crystal Tower Award as Pioneer in Alzheimer’s Disease Research from the Alzheimer’s Association (1998), and the Luigi Amaducci Memorial Award, International Psychogeriatric Association, (2003).



Robert Katzman was also a devoted husband, father and grandfather. He leaves behind him a loving family: his wife, Nancy Katzman, who was his lifelong partner and tireless supporter since their meeting as undergraduates at the University of Chicago, his two sons, Daniel and David, and his grandson, Jesse Byam-Katzman. His many colleagues and friends send our condolences to the family, and we share in their grief. But hopefully we all will find solace in Bob’s well-lived life, and the scientific and public policy legacy that he left in the fight against AD. We will miss him.

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REFERENCE

- [1] Katzman R (1976) Editorial: The prevalence and malignancy of Alzheimer disease. A major killer, *Arch Neurol* **33**, 217-218.