STANLEY J. KORSMEYER

8 JUNE 1950 • 31 MARCH 2005
Stanley J. Korsmeyer, M.D., a nonsmoker and vigorous man in perfect health, died of a ravaging lung cancer at the age of fifty-four on 31 March 2005. The loss of Dr. Korsmeyer in the prime of his career is a tragedy for his family and for all of academic medicine.

Stan, as he liked to be called, was born in Beardstown, Illinois, the son of Willard and Carnella Korsmeyer, who operated a family livestock farm. A hard worker from childhood, he showed the grand champion pair of hogs at the Illinois State Fair at the age of fourteen. He received the Governor’s Trophy as his first piece of “hardware.” There were many more to come.

As a high-school student, he was interested in veterinary medicine, but at the University of Illinois, an astute veterinarian persuaded him to enter medical school. There he was guided into hematology/oncology by the late Paul Heller, M.D., the latter a refugee from the Nazis who became chief of hematology at the university. From Illinois, where he was a top student, Stan went on to become an intern and resident in medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, where the then chair of the department, Holly Smith, M.D., considered him to be one of the best residents he had ever known.

Following his residency, Stan began his investigative career in earnest. He became a research fellow at the National Institutes of Health, where he worked closely with Phillip Leder, M.D., and Thomas Waldman, M.D. There in the 1980s he burst on the biomedical research scene with his discovery that a form of murine lymphoma was due to a mutation that abrogates apoptosis. The mutated gene called BCL-2 became the first discovered gene in a large family that prevents or encourages cells to enter the apoptotic death pathway. Analogues of these genes also control the development of organs and limbs. Korsmeyer’s seminal contribution and his follow-up discoveries changed our view of the pathophysiology of cancer. “The recognition of apoptosis’ primary role in cancer was a major insight that profoundly affected how we thought about cell death and survival,” said Douglas Green of the University of California, San Diego.

For his trailblazing research Stan was elected to the American Philosophical Society, the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His many honors included the Bristol-Meyers Squibb Award for Distinguished Achievement in Cancer Research, the General Motors Mott Award, the first Wiley Foundation Prize in Biomedical Science, the Pezcoller Foundation-AACR International Award, the Louisa Gross Horovitz Prize of Columbia University, and, as an example of his citizenship, the Harvard Mentoring Award.

Stan left NIH to join the faculty at Washington University in St. [244]
Louis, where he rose to become director of the Division of Medical Oncology and professor of medicine. For the past nineteen years he was an investigator of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

“He was everybody’s hero—as a scientist and as a human being,” said Robert Horvitz of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an eminent scientist, Nobel laureate, and close friend. “His contributions were truly major and pioneering, and they revolutionized the field.”

Stan joined Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in 1998 and became the Sidney Farber Professor of Pathology at the Harvard Medical School. His laboratory was an instant lodestone for young investigators. A few months after his recruitment I stated, “I recruited him because I wanted him in the Dana-Farber family—his character would shine on us and make everyone a better team player. Within a few months of his coming, I felt a surge of morale in the faculty. He is a team player and an enhancer of other people’s productivity and ability to work together.”

His impact on young people was truly remarkable. Nick Powley, a former student in the Korsmeyer lab, summarized the mentoring he enjoyed with these observations: “He led with succinct and respectful questions that helped others to arrive at their own solutions with a sense of accomplishment only attainable through discovery and personal achievement. He was the best role model.”

At Dana-Farber, Stan headed the Program in Molecular Oncology within the Department of Cancer Immunology and AIDS. As chair of the executive committee for research, Stan was a scientific visionary and driving force, helping to shape the Institute’s new strategic plans for attacking cancer, which emphasize collaboration among researchers within and outside of Dana-Farber while employing the most advanced tools for discovering new cancer drug candidates. At the time of his death, he and his colleagues had been applying what they had learned over the years, manipulating apoptosis molecules to force cancer cells to self-destruct.

Loren Walensky, M.D., Ph.D., a young investigator who is working on such a project, was awed by Stan’s endurance and persistence during the course of his illness: “With his diagnosis, he had been dealt a very daunting outlook, yet he came to work every day he could. If he had to come in a wheelchair, he did. If he was looking or feeling unwell because of the treatment, he still came to work. He was very tough scientifically, and that toughness applied to how he fought his disease.”

Stan is survived by his beloved family, including his wife, Susan (Reynard) Korsmeyer; sons Jason and Evan; parents Willard and Carnella; sisters Lynn Hollahan, Karen Randolla, and Janet Korsmeyer; grandfather Carl Jolly; and three nephews and five nieces, as well as many aunts, uncles, and cousins.
Edward J. Benz Jr., M.D., the president of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, succinctly described Stan’s great career: “Stan Korsmeyer was one of the world’s best scientists and one of its greatest people. He was admired and loved for who he was even more than for what he accomplished. Even in the face of his illness, he was determined to take care of and support his family and those who depended on him in his lab. We will miss him profoundly.”

Elected 2002

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