Waldo Nelson, ‘father of pediatrics,’ dead at 98

Waldo “Bill” Nelson, M.D., FAAP, referred to as the father of pediatrics and famous for the worldwide published book he edited for 50 years, Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics, died March 2 at his home in Gladwyne, Pa., after suffering a stroke. He was 98.

Former chairman of the department of pediatrics at Temple University School of Medicine, and former medical director at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, both in Philadelphia, Dr. Nelson influenced American pediatrics in many ways, according to former AAP president, George D. Comerici, M.D.

Possibly his most notable achievement was the relationship he forged in 1947 between Temple University and St. Christopher's, which later earned the hospital national recognition for its excellence in pediatric medicine and research.

“Having had an opportunity to be the leader of the section, he was always able to work with people from different backgrounds. At the same time, he was able to make a lot of people feel comfortable,” said Dr. Sanders, his former colleague.

One of the warmest memories that AAP board member Sue Aronson, M.D., has of Dr. Nelson is when she was once making rounds with medical students, and suddenly saw Dr. Nelson at the door. When she asked him what was so urgent, he simply said, “No, I’m just listening to learn.”

Dr. Nelson was a stern, yet caring person who never hesitated to help colleagues in need of advice. His textbook, often referred to as the pediatrician’s bible or the green bible, was one way in which he offered support and expertise.

“It’s the most popular book on pediatrics for medical students, residents and practitioners alike,” said Dr. Comerici. As a medical student, Dr. Comerici could not afford to purchase the textbook. Dr. Nelson not only kindly offered him a free copy, but gave him the very first copy of the sixth edition printing before it had even been bound.

Many years later, he asked for it back, but Dr. Comerici jokingly replied, “That textbook remains a cherished possession. It’s not for sale.”

Dr. Nelson’s long list of honors included the Jacobson Award in 1969, the Howland Award in 1972, the Armstrong Award in 1984, the Gold Medal Award of Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia in 1985, the Proctor Award from Children’s Hospital Medical Center in Cincinnati in 1986, the Donald Drake Medal from the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine in 1990, and the AAP Lifetime Achievement Award in 1994.

Two more recognitions include the establishment of an endowed chair in his name at Temple University, and the Waldo E. Nelson Medical Achievement Award at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children. Dr. Nelson also was one of the first pediatricians to be inducted into the Philadelphia Pediatric Society’s Hall of Fame.

Born in McClure, Ohio, he received his medical degree from the University of Cincinnati School of Medicine in 1926. He interned at Cincinnati General Hospital and completed his residency in pediatrics at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital.

Dr. Nelson served as medical director of the Children’s Convalescent Home in Cincinnati from 1941-46, and was chairman of the department of pediatrics at Temple University School of Medicine from 1940-64. He taught at the Medical College of Pennsylvania from 1964-80, and taught at Temple University well into the 1980’s.

Dr. Nelson joined the Academy in 1937, serving on many AAP committees over the years, including the Committees on Medical Education, Pediatric Awards, Scientific Program, and Tuberculosis. He was a member of the Section on Pulmonology.

He was affiliated with several other societies including the American Medical Association, the Society for Pediatric Research and the Philadelphia Pediatric Society. He served as president of the American Pediatric Society in 1963.

He was first offered the opportunity to edit the popular Textbook of Pediatrics, (which later bore his name) in 1941 after the previous editors’ deaths. In addition, he edited the Journal of Pediatrics from 1959-77, helping to triple its circulation. He served as consulting editor from 1977-95, and for the last two years was emeritus editor.

“He took over the editorship and turned it into one of the leading pediatric journals,” said Dr. Comerici. “He was responsible for demanding very high quality research and disseminating that to researchers and practitioners alike.”

Everybody universally respected him as an editor,” added Dr. Smith, who, for about 20 years, assisted Dr. Nelson in editing the Journal of Pediatrics.

Hundreds of pediatricians will remember Dr. Nelson as an influential person who epitomized the old school pediatric professor, said Dr. Comerici.

Dr. Nelson is survived by his two daughters, Jane N. Beatty of Villanova, Pa., and Ann W. Behrman of Belvedere, Calif.; a son, William H. Nelson of Swarthmore, Pa.; eight grandchildren and 15 great grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his wife, Margery Harris, who died in 1982.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that contributions be made in Dr. Nelson’s memory to either Wittenberg University, Office of Advancement, P.O. Box 720, Springfield, Ohio 45501, or the Waldo E. Nelson Lecture Fund, c/o St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children, Erie & Front Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19134-1095.

— Stefanie Dell’Arina

Memorials can be sent to the Benjamin Kagan Memorial Pediatric Fund, Department of Pediatrics, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, 8700 Beverly Blvd., Rm. 4510, Los Angeles, CA 90048.

Josef Svejcar, M.D., of Prague, Czechoslovakia, died Jan. 30 at age 99.

Svejcar was an AAP honorary fellow from 1963 to 1989. He was a member of the Czech Pediatric Society and the Green Cross Czech Republic of Green Cross International. He headed the department of pediatrics at the Thomayer Hospital Postgraduate Medical Institute in Prague.

After his retirement 30 years ago, Dr. Svejcar chose to remain active as a lecturer and adviser to the health ministry. He was once referred to as the “Dr. Spock” of Central Europe, revered by generations of Czech mothers for his book on child care.

A memorial service will be held on May 20 in honor of his 100th birthday.

Dr. Kagan was a member of the AAP Section on Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics and the Section on Infectious Diseases.

He was a well-respected mentor among his peers, according to David L. Rimoine, M.D., Ph.D., professor of pediatrics and medicine at UCLA.

“Dr. Rimoine was a warm, caring person who commanded the respect and admiration of all those around him,” said Dr. Rimoine.

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