Tribute

Gordon Meiklejohn, M.D., 1911–1997

Gordon Meiklejohn, a past-president of the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), died on 28 January 1997 at the age of 85.

Gordon was born in Providence, Rhode Island, the son of a distinguished educator. He received his undergraduate education at the University of Wisconsin and at Yenching University in Peking (now Beijing). He received his M.D. degree from McGill University Faculty of Medicine in Montreal. Postgraduate training in internal medicine followed at Montreal General Hospital and in several hospitals in California. He received training in virology, infectious diseases, and public health at the University of California. Gordon then served on the faculty of the University of California Medical School from 1943 to 1951, rising through the ranks to become Associate Professor of Medicine. In 1951, he became chairman of the Department of Medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, a position he was to hold for 25 years. When he stepped down as chairman in 1976, Gordon was one of the longest tenured department chairs in the country!

Dr. Meiklejohn’s enormously productive research career focused on the atypical pneumonias and viral respiratory diseases, particularly influenza. These research interests were driven in large part by the needs of a wartime economy and massive mobilization of the US armed forces. Maintaining the health of the armed forces was a challenging responsibility undertaken by the Armed Forces Epidemiological Board (AFEB), an organization that brought together the brightest medical minds in the country and to which Gordon was particularly devoted. Indeed, the roster of the board and its various commissions was a veritable “Who’s Who” of the leadership in academic infectious diseases, microbiology, and preventive medicine in the United States for most of the next 30 years.

The AFEB’s Commission on Influenza and Gordon Meiklejohn were made for each other. His research interest in influenza was legendary, and his 40 unbroken years of influenza surveillance and vaccine evaluation carried out at Lowry Air Force Base will likely never be repeated, although the need for such studies remains ongoing. So grateful were the US armed forces for these contributions that Gordon was awarded two Outstanding Civilian Service Medals.

Since stepping down as chairman of the Department of Medicine in 1976, Gordon has been anything but retired. He devoted increasing effort in his later years to studying influenza prevention in the elderly, particularly those in residential care facilities and nursing homes. Ever the patient and methodical investigator, he derived particular satisfaction from epidemiologic problem-solving. Colleagues will remember his great pleasure in defining the epidemiology of an outbreak of Q fever at the University of Colorado some years ago.

Within the IDSA, Gordon served as councilor and subsequently as president. He was the recipient of the Maxwell Finland Lectureship Award and the Bristol Award, the latter being the most prestigious award the IDSA can bestow. He received the Bruce Award in Preventive Medicine from the American College of Physicians and was a Master of the College. He received honorary degrees from the University of Colorado and from his alma mater, McGill University.

Gordon participated actively and enthusiastically in the World Health Organization’s Smallpox Eradication Program and made many field visits in support of that program in Zaire, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, Indonesia, and India. The Indians referred to him simply as “The Professor,” a name that truly fit.

Gordon was often described as quiet, thoughtful, wise, and soft-spoken, and he was all of those. As a leader, he was determined, inspirational, and uncompromising. His well-known skills in hockey and tennis attested to his competitive spirit. Two characteristics stood out, however: unquestioned integrity and gentle humility. Those attributes characterized
all his interactions with his peers, his faculty, and his students. In the last several years, it became apparent that his body was increasingly unable to keep up with his mind. Gordon illustrated his determination by remaining as active as his body would permit; never would he accept defeat or express his frustration. His ready smile and sharp wit never failed.

In his death, we have lost a distinguished educator, a wise leader, and a beloved role model; yet through his life, we have been enormously enriched.

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