Obituary

In Memoriam: Walter O. Spitzer (1937–2006)

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Dr. Walter O. Spitzer, Emeritus Professor of Epidemiology at McGill University and Editor Emeritus of the Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, died of complications following a car accident on April 27, 2006. He was born in Paraguay in 1937 and received his Doctor of Medicine degree at the University of Toronto in 1962 and his Master of Public Health degree at Yale University in 1970. From 1969 to 1975, he served first as Assistant and then as Associate Professor of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at McMaster University. In 1975, he was appointed Professor of Epidemiology and Health at McGill University, a post he occupied until his retirement in 1995; from 1984 to 1993, he also served as Chairman of the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics. Following his retirement, and almost until the time of his death, he continued to engage in research and academic activities, to offer expert testimony to government and legal tribunals, to consult, and to serve on government- and industry-sponsored scientific advisory committees.

In the last years of his life, Walter suffered from increasingly severe ill health, which he first fought but ultimately was forced to accept. That acceptance was never complete, however, and he raged against it. Until he found it necessary to cut back his duties, his energy was prodigious, and his academic interests were catholic in scope: an incomplete list includes the evaluation of health manpower needs, the assessment of quality of life, the application of epidemiologic principles to clinical medicine and to the evaluation of drug efficacy and safety, considerations of the validity of various research methods, and causality assessment. He made original contributions in each of these fields.

Whatever the outcome, on such occasions all protagonists came away enriched. During his editorship of the Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, he opened its pages to new ideas and to debate. Like many epidemiologists of his age, Walter became increasingly concerned with the tendency of young epidemiologists to rely more and more on technocracy, sometimes at the expense of thought, and on that subject he could express himself in vivid language.

Shortly before he died, Walter described to me what he considered to be among his most significant achievements. Apart from the excellence of the teaching for which he was responsible, these achievements were 1) his role (together with Dr. Michel Ibrahim) in organizing the Bermuda Conference (1) in 1978, a landmark occasion on which our understanding of case-control methods was advanced; 2) his demonstration, as early as 1973, that public health strategies, such as the delivery of primary health care by nurse practitioners (2), can successfully be evaluated in randomized trials (he had authoritatively been informed by “experts” that such trials could not be conducted); and 3) his ability to organize large and complex multinational studies.

Walter Spitzer will be remembered by generations of students and colleagues as an original and feisty epidemiologist, and as a friend.

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REFERENCES

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