Obituary

Lloyd Saxon Graham, 1922–2012

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Dr. Graham received undergraduate training in history and English at Amherst College, graduating in 1943. During World War II, he served as a special agent in the US Army Counter Intelligence Corps from 1943 to 1946. After earning a PhD degree in sociology from Yale University in 1951, he taught at Chatham College for several years. Applying his training in sociology to the collection of survey data, he then worked at the University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health from 1953 to 1956 when he joined Roswell Park Cancer Institute as Director of Community Epidemiology Studies. Although he maintained an affiliation with Roswell Park throughout his career, he was appointed Professorial Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University at Buffalo, in 1958 and Professor of Sociology and Professor of Social and Preventive Medicine in 1966. He became Chair of Social and Preventive Medicine in 1981, serving as Chair until his retirement in 1991. During his tenure as Chair, the department rose to national prominence.

Saxon Graham, Professor and Chair Emeritus of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, the University at Buffalo, died on May 19, 2012. Dr. Graham was a devoted scientist, dedicated to the generation and translation of scientific findings and to the prevention of disease and human suffering. He worked as both an investigator and a public health activist. For example, in the early 1960s, as evidence of the pathogenicity of cigarette smoking accumulated and well before governmental entities had acted, he and a prominent oncology surgeon from Roswell Park Cancer Institute went to the New York State capital to urge legislators to require that warning labels be affixed to cigarette packages.

Dr. Graham’s major scientific contributions were to the nutritional epidemiology of cancer. In 1957, he initiated a series of studies at Roswell Park Cancer Institute. In these, he compared pre-illness diets of cancer patients with those of hospital controls. Because of the differences he observed in cancer rates among the racial/ethnic groups in Buffalo at that time, he was interested in understanding the contribution of diet to cancer etiology. He exploited a simple method of gathering data: Interviewers asked patients about the frequency with which they consumed several staple food items. At the time, there was little interest in the connection between nutrition and cancer risk. The notion that nutrition could influence cancer was seen as unlikely, and Dr. Graham’s methods were widely dismissed. Nonetheless, as his findings based on these case-control comparisons derived from the experience of Roswell Park cancer patients accumulated, they gave rise to an entire field of inquiry. His research had uncovered surprising and intriguing associations between dietary practice and cancer risk. On the basis of those findings, he went on to conduct a series of case-control and cohort studies focused on diet in the etiology and prevention of cancer at numerous sites. In the wake of his path-breaking approach, other scientists began to study nutrition and cancer, and nutrition became a major focus of cancer prevention research.
Dr. Graham was author or coauthor of over 170 scientific publications, and his work has been cited thousands of times. His work was supported by research and training grants from the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, and the US Agency for International Development throughout his career.

Dr. Graham was a scrupulously honest researcher. Although dietary fiber had been proposed as protective against cancer and fat had been proposed to be a risk factor, the data he had collected did not show these associations, and he argued, often strenuously, that the available evidence was weak to nonexistent. Subsequent research has largely vindicated Dr. Graham’s observations.

Because of his scientific prominence and leadership, Dr. Graham was invited to serve on numerous national and international advisory bodies including the National Institutes of Health Study Section on Epidemiology and Disease Control, American Cancer Society Division of Cancer Control, National Cancer Institute Board of Scientific Counselors, International Agency for Research on Cancer Scientific Council, and the World Health Organization. In 1979, he played a role in the founding of the American College of Epidemiology as a member of its inaugural board of directors. In 1986, he was elected President of the Society for Epidemiologic Research. Dr. Graham received the Distinguished Achievement Award from the American Society for Preventive Oncology. His prominence and overpowering collegiality led to his being awarded the Stockton Kimball Award from the School of Medicine, University at Buffalo.

Although his achievements in cancer research were monumental, Dr. Graham regarded his mentoring of graduate students and junior investigators to be his most important and enduring contribution. He was a demanding, inspiring and thought-provoking, but also patient and kind teacher and mentor. He chaired more than 20 doctoral dissertation committees, mentoring students who went on to leadership positions around the United States and the world. Over half of his publications were coauthored by his students or younger colleagues. In 2007, his colleagues established a lectureship in his honor at the School of Public Health and Health Professions, The University at Buffalo.

Although Dr. Graham had retired, he continued until shortly before his death to participate in the academic life of the University at Buffalo. He will be missed.

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Conflict of interest: none declared.