In Memoriam: Donald H. Gilden, MD (1937-2016)

Kenneth L. Tyler, MD; Maria Nagel, MD

Donald H. Gilden, MD, passed away on August 22, 2016, after a long battle with renal cell carcinoma. He remained active as the director of a major National Institutes of Health-funded research laboratory in the Department of Neurology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine until the time of his death. Don had previously served as the second chair of the University of Colorado's Department of Neurology, a position he held for nearly a quarter of a century (1985-2009) before relinquishing his administrative duties to devote his full-time efforts to his research program on the biology of varicella-zoster virus (VZV). During his tenure, the department grew into one of the nation's leading academic neurology programs.

Don was a Dartmouth undergraduate, a University of Maryland medical student, and completed his neurology residency training at the University of Chicago. His interest in neurovirology was fostered during his postdoctoral years (1969-1971) at Johns Hopkins where he worked closely with Neal Nathanson, MD, who would later become chair of Microbiology at the University of Pennsylvania. After completing his neurovirology fellowship, Don joined the faculty of the Wistar Institute and the University of Pennsylvania, where he rose rapidly to the rank of professor. At the Wistar, he developed a close personal and professional friendship with the director, Dr Hilary Koprowski, which would last until Koprowski's death in 2013. Like Koprowski, Don cultivated a plethora of interests outside of science and medicine. He was an accomplished athlete who played catcher for Israel's softball team in the XIth Maccabiah Games (1981). He was an expert skier who loved treacherous double black diamond runs and mogul fields and an accomplished classical musician who never traveled without his beloved Amati violin. His violin performances were a regular feature of many departmental and professional society gatherings.

Don left an extraordinary legacy of accomplishment at every institution with which he was affiliated and subsequently received honors from each, including the University of Maryland Medical Association Honor Award and Gold Key in 2008, the University of Chicago's Alumni Award for Distinguished Service (1991), and election to the Johns Hopkins Society of Fellows (2000). Don's retirement as chair of Neurology was marked by a symposium in his honor attended by many of his trainees and colleagues (2010), and by the establishment of an annual “Gilden Lectureship” hosted by the Department of Neurology. In addition to these awards, Don received the “Outstanding Teacher” award of the Neurology residents he trained 4 times (a departmental record), was elected to the Association of American Physicians (1994), and to fellowship in the American Association for the Advance-ment of Science (2003). He was the recipient of the International Society of Neurovirology (ISNV) Pioneer Award and the Drexel Hilary Koprowski Prize in Neurovirology (2014). He was a member of numerous journal editorial boards including those of Neurology and Annals of Neurology. He was elected to honorary membership in the American Neurological Association (2007) and served on their council and as a Second Vice President.

Don was the author of more than 400 papers, reviews, and chapters. His most notable contributions were in neurovirology and in particular in the field of VZV. Don arguably produced more seminal contributions to our understanding of the biology and neurological diseases caused by this virus and their mechanism(s) than any other individual. Among his many contributions were the demonstration that VZV DNA could be found in normal human dorsal root ganglia and that this was the site of viral latency,1,2 that the latent VZV DNA was in the form of a circular episome in ganglia,3 and that specific viral transcripts were expressed during viral latency.4 Don's clinical studies of VZV, including establishing zoster sine herpete (shingles pain without rash) as a true clinical entity,5 and the seminal demonstration that VZV produced a “vasculopathy” and that this, rather than simply viral infection of neurons, was the critical component of the pathogenesis of “VZV encephalitis.”6 His groundbreaking studies of FVV were continuing at the time of his death. His most recent work established an association between VZV infection and temporal (giant cell) arteritis by showing that the majority of arteries form patients with this enigmatic disorder contained viroin particles, viral antigen, and viral DNA.7 The implication of this discovery for the pathogenesis of temporal arteritis, as well as its diagnosis and treatment, is currently being actively investigated by his research group. True to form, Don left them a detailed handwritten “roadmap” of how he wanted them to proceed in these studies, written in the late stage of his illness.

With Don's passing, neurology lost an extraordinary individual and a truly “larger-than-life” figure who excelled in all aspects of academic life. He gave 100% to everything he did both personally and professionally and expected the same from everyone he worked with. His passing leaves a tremendous void for his many lifelong colleagues and friends. He will be greatly missed by these friends and by the family he was so extra-
ordinarily proud of and devoted to including his wife, Audrey, and their 3 sons, Adam, Paul, and Daniel, and their families.


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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.