Thomas Herald Rea, MD
1929-2016

It is with great sadness that I report the passing of Dr. Thomas H. Rea. He passed peacefully on Sunday afternoon in the company of his family and loved ones.

A world renowned dermatologist and leprologist, Dr. Rea served as the Project Director for the Hansen’s Disease (HD) Program at the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California (LAC+USC) Medical Center in Los Angeles for 31 years before retiring from this role in 2012. Prior to the creation of the HD program at USC, Dr. Rea had already served as a national leader in Hansen’s Disease research and care, beginning in 1963 at Bellevue Hospital in New York.

For over 50 years, Dr. Rea has been a leading voice in Hansen’s Disease care.

As a young faculty member in the Department of Dermatology at New York University (NYU), he developed an interest in HD, recognizing the direct influence of the immune system on the clinical presentation of the disease. With only corticosteroids and clofazimine available to combat erythema nodosum leprosum (ENL) in some of his patients, he recognized the dramatic efficacy of the controversial drug thalidomide in managing ENL and lobbied the FDA for approval of its use.

Dr. Rea completed his undergraduate studies at Oberlin College and his M.D. at the University of Michigan where he also did his internship and dermatology residency at the University Hospital in Ann Arbor. He went on to his fellowship training in the Department of Dermatology at the New York University, School of Medicine. His interests in research stem from the surrounding vibrant immunology research community at NYU, including scientists like Dr. Rudolph Baer, studying mechanisms of contact dermatitis and Dr. H. Sherwood Lawrence doing early work on immunologic memory.

Dr. Rea served as Chief of the Division of Dermatology at USC between 1981 and 1996. During this time, Dr. Rea began studying the immunology of HD, investigating the role of antibodies and cell-mediated immune (CMI) responses. He sought additional training (1980-1981) in CMI with Dr. John Turk at the Royal College of Surgeons in London and, while there, took advantage of the presence of Dr. Dennis Ridley to learn the complex Ridley-Jopling histopathological classification scheme for HD. His interests in research have resulted in >140 published, peer reviewed articles.

Working closely with Dr. Robert Modlin, Dr. Rea helped to identify the distinct CD4 and CD8 T cell populations which produce the key Th1 and Th2 cytokines at the site of disease in leprosy, providing evidence that distinct functional T cells contribute to the pathogeneiss, resistance versus susceptibility to infection by the leprosy bacillus. These studies were published in Nature and Science, becoming landmark papers in our understanding of the immune system.
In 2015, the HD clinic at USC was renamed the Thomas H. Rea Hansen’s Disease Clinic at LAC+USC and it currently serves more patients than any of the other 12 National Hansen’s Disease Program ambulatory care clinics. Dr. Rea was the heart and soul of this clinic. He remained very active in direct patient care until his retirement in 2015. Always soft spoken, he approached each patient with sincerity. He was a fierce advocate for those who entrusted themselves to his care.

As a mentor, Dr. Rea always enjoyed teaching moments with a multi-generational field of clinicians, doctors, medical students, laboratory scientists and guests. His expertise was shared across a geographical area far larger than the LA clinic. From his early days in New York he promoted the need for HD awareness in the U.S. and internationally. To this end he assisted and consulted with numerous physicians- locally, nationally and internationally.

Even so, Dr. Rea’s greatest impact may have been local to the Los Angeles community. He has, in one way or another, impacted every Dermatologist in our area of the world. To the dermatology and HD community, Dr. Rea was a world-renowned leprologist, with expertise in both the clinical aspects and basic research of the disease. To us, he was a teacher, advisor, mentor and friend. He always found time to offer counsel and encouragement. Residents and colleagues have shared stories of engaging in colorful discussions with Dr. Rea over questions of culture, history, philosophy and art. Dr. Rea found time for everyone.

Dr. Rea is survived by his wife of 51 years, Mary, his two sons, Steven and Andrew, and four grandchildren.

He is greatly missed.

David H. Peng MD MPH

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