



Obituary: John Charles Cutler / Pioneer in preventing sexual diseases

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By Jan Ackerman, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Long before AIDS became an international health problem, Dr. John Charles Cutler led the way in trying to prevent and control sexually transmitted diseases around the world.

Dr. Cutler, a former assistant surgeon general of the U.S. Public Health Service, was part of a group that in 1944 worked out the ways penicillin could be used to treat syphilis.

As one of the founders of the Family Health Council of Western Pennsylvania in 1971, he worked tirelessly to find better ways to provide affordable reproductive health-care services to women who need them.

"He thought every person should have access to these services, regardless of income," said Richard Baird, acting president of the Family Health Council.

"To him, health was more than simply studying microbes. It was life," said Ravi Sharma, professor of demography at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health.

Sharma said Dr. Cutler looked at the study of health in a "holistic" fashion, relating it to social, political, economic and cultural customs.

"He was a pioneer who had firsthand experiences of living and working in the Third World," he said.

Dr. Cutler, of Point Breeze, a retired professor at Pitt's Graduate School of Public Health, died Saturday at West Penn Hospital of pneumonia following a heart attack. He was 87.

His wife of 60 years, Eliese S. Cutler, said he was modest about his personal accomplishments but resolute in his mission.

Interviewed in 1988, Dr. Cutler told a reporter for The Pittsburgh Press that the AIDS problem was a replay of venereal disease scenarios of bygone years.

"The control of AIDS will come only when there's a shift from a preachy, moral approach to a medical viewpoint," he said.

"The kind of education that worked during World War II is needed again. The military services provided education about venereal disease and backed it up with making condoms and prophylaxis kits readily available."

Dr. Cutler was born and raised in Cleveland and graduated from Western Reserve University Medical School in 1941 with a Phi Beta Kappa key. In 1942, he joined the Public Health

Service as a commissioned officer and remained active until 1967. During World War II, he was a medical officer on convoy duty in the Coast Guard.

His interest in the prevention and control of sexually transmitted diseases began in 1943 when he worked as a medical officer in the U.S. Public Health Venereal Disease Research Laboratory in Staten Island, N.Y. That led to his appointment to head a venereal disease research program for the Pan American Sanitary Bureau in Guatemala in 1948.

In 1949, the World Health Organization asked him to lead a venereal disease demonstration program for Southeast Asia that was based in India, which had won its independence from the British crown in 1947.

"There were 80 Americans in all of India," said Dr. Cutler's wife, who accompanied him there and to other international posts. She said her husband was always proud that he was able to raise the Indian flag in Simla, India, after the independence.

After returning to the States in 1950, Dr. Cutler continued to rise in rank until he became assistant surgeon general of the U.S. Public Health Service in 1958.

In 1960, he worked for the Allegheny County Health Department, organizing the final polio vaccination program in the Hill District. From 1961 to 1967, he was an assistant and then deputy director of what later became the Pan American Health Organization in Washington, D.C.

He returned to Pittsburgh for good in 1967 when he was recruited as professor of international health to head the population division in the Graduate School of Public Health at Pitt. In that post, Dr. Cutler was instrumental in getting funds for a major international health project in West Africa. With federal funding, he organized a program that enabled obstetricians and gynecologists from Third World countries to come to the United States for training in reproductive health technology.

He served as chairman of Pitt's department of health administration and was acting dean of the Graduate School of Public Health in 1968 and 1969.

Dr. Gordon MacLeod, professor of health policy and management at the graduate school, said Dr. Cutler had continued to return to the school on a weekly basis until a few weeks ago.

"He was a much beloved professor, both at the graduate school [of Public Health] and at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs," MacLeod said.

In addition to his wife, Dr. Cutler is survived by a sister, Elizabeth Cobb of Manson, Wash.

Friends will be received at John A. Freyvogel Sons Funeral Home, 4900 Centre Ave. at Devonshire Street, Shadyside, from 7 to 9 p.m. today and one hour prior to an 11 a.m. memorial service tomorrow.

Jan Ackerman can be reached at jackerman@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1370.

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