In Memoriam


One of the great “ambassadors of Pathology,” Robert W. Wissler, the Donald N. Pritzker Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus in the Department of Pathology at the University of Chicago, died on November 28, 2006. Despite his good cheer, his last years were plagued by the increasingly disabling effects of Alzheimer’s disease, although his death was as a result of heart failure.

Bob Wissler was born in Richmond, IN of school- teaching parents. After an undergraduate degree at Earlham College, he spent most of the rest of his academic life at the University of Chicago, where he received his M.S., Ph.D. (1946), and M.D. (1948). He rose rapidly through the academic ranks, becoming Professor of Pathology and then chair of the Department of Pathology in 1957, a position he held for the next 15 years.

His research covered a wide range of experimental pathology, starting with nutritional pathology under the tutelage of his predecessor, Paul Roberts Cannon. But most of his research career was devoted to the study of atherosclerosis in humans and experimental animals, mostly rodents and nonhuman primates. He was one of the first to demonstrate atheromatous lesions in the rat, a forerunner of the now widespread use of diet and gene manipulation in the mouse for atherogenesis investigations. Many studies were devoted to the study of regression of atherosclerosis in the nonhuman primate. Perhaps most enduring among his contributions was his organization and leadership of the unique study of the natural history of atherosclerosis in young subjects, aged 15 to 34 years, designated PDAY (pathobiological determinants of atherosclerosis in youth), which demonstrated the early onset of atherosclerosis in young subjects, arteries of which were obtained from 3000 forensic autopsies. Dr. Wissler was himself responsible for the collection of many of these samples, which now constitute a standardized resource for those wishing to study the disease. “The findings of the PDAY study have provided a major impetus to the efforts to control risk factors for adult coronary heart disease in children, teenagers, and young adults. This would never have happened without Bob Wissler,” stated Henry McGill of the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research, who was one of the initiating steering committee members for the PDAY study.

Bob Wissler had a major impact on pathology at the University of Chicago, as well as nationally and internationally. He unified all of the clinical laboratories to a single entity and resurrected the graduate program in experimental pathology, initiating a combined degree program for pathology residents. Among the early pathology Ph.D. recipients were Frank Fitch, Donald Rowley, and Hans Schreiber, all of whom were major faculty contributors to the department for almost as long as Bob Wissler. Other distinguished pathology degree recipients included Bob Waterston and Don Mosier. Benjamin Spargo, Seymour Giagov, Werner Kirsten, and Godfrey Getz were also long-standing contributors to “The Department Bob Built.” Bob Wissler was the first director of one of the few specialized Centers of Research in Atherosclerosis, at that time a new program launched by the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute. Along with Irv Rosenberg, he was the founding chairman of the Interdisciplinary Graduate Committee on Nutritional Biology. His research operations were notable for the participation of large numbers of undergraduates, many of whom vol-
unteered, so taken were they with his charm and commitment to them.

Bob Wissler received numerous national and international awards, mostly for his strong accomplishment and advocacy. He was instrumental in the organization of and fund raising for several international conferences on atherosclerosis. His fundraising was largely focused on travel money for young investigators attending these conferences. He was an initiating agent in the formation of the Association of Pathology Chairmen and the Council on Arteriosclerosis of the American Heart Association. He was the recipient of five honorary degrees, as well the Gold-Headed Cane (1983) from the American Association of Pathologists (now the American Society for Investigative Pathology). In accepting this cane, which had also been received by his mentor, Paul R. Cannon, he noted that he entered pathology “to save humanity,” which he did actively by promoting the preventive modification of risk factors for atherosclerosis. Among his leadership roles were the Presidency of both of ASIP’s predecessor societies, the American Society of Experimental Pathology (1961–1962) and the American Association of Pathologists and Bacteriologists (1968–1969), as well as the Association of Pathology Chairman (1966–1967) and the American Board of Pathology (1979–1980).

Bob Wissler was an energetic, hospitable, and very optimistic and generous man. He was a perennial punster and frequently composed doggerel. He was loyal to his students and coworkers, who often became close to his family. He was an occasional clarinetist and frequent gardener and tennis player, mostly with members of his research group.

He leaves behind his wife Betty, devoted to each other for 66 years, having married at the end of his 1st year of medical school. They had four children: Barbara Wissler Mayers of Chicago; Mary Wissler Graham of Washington, DC; John Polk Wissler of Round Mountain, CA; and David William Wissler (deceased). Betty and Bob have six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

He will be sorely missed.

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