In memoriam: Richard J. Havel (1925-2016)

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Researchers in lipid metabolism note the passing of a colleague who contributed immensely to the emergence of our field of investigation. Richard (Dick) Havel obtained his M.D. and M.S. degrees from the University of Oregon Medical School in 1949, and completed his residency training in Medicine at Cornell, where he was Chief Resident in 1952-1953. He then trained at the NIH until 1956, at which time he moved to the University of California, San Francisco. There, he joined the founding faculty of the Cardiovascular Research Institute, under the leadership of Julius Comroe, succeeding him as Director of the Institute and later as Interim Director until his retirement in 1996. From 1971 until 1996 he also served as Director of the Specialized Center for Research in Arteriosclerosis (SCOR), an NIH supported group of laboratories that included a number of investigators, bringing an array of technical approaches to lipid research.

While at the NIH, he recognized the need for a quantitative means for separating and measuring the major classes of circulating lipoproteins. He developed the technique of quantitative ultracentrifugation that became the standard in the field to this day. This allowed the discrimination of clinical phenotypes and provided a basis for understanding lipid transport in health and disease. Among the resulting studies, he was the first to define a genetic disorder of lipoproteins, lipoprotein lipase deficiency. Later, under his direction, the SCOR investigators created a large body of integrated discovery on lipoprotein biology and its clinical significance, including the multi-staged formation of triglyceride-rich lipoproteins, cholesterol efflux, structural and functional studies of HDL, and one of the first demonstrations that reducing the levels of atherogenic lipoproteins would result in diminution of the volume of arterial plaques.

Dick was devoted to his wife, Gini (Virginia), sons Chris, Tim and Peter - now an investigator in endocrinology and metabolism in his own right, daughter Julianne, and grandchildren, Jocelyn, Tyler,
and Cameron. Those who knew him were amazed at his command of the scientific and clinical literature. When asked a question, he would gaze briefly at the ceiling, and then come forth with all the relevant citations from the literature - journal, authors and subject as though reading from the Index Medicus. Not only did he have an encompassing knowledge of metabolism, but he was also endowed with an impressively analytical mind and deep insights. A quality appreciated by all who knew him and worked with him was his high level of scientific integrity. His scientific acumen was balanced by his skill and empathy as a clinician. He was truly a polymath, his mind extending into nature and the environment, the biology of all living creatures, and history, leading to the nickname, “Dick’Iknow”.

Dick received numerous accolades during his career, including election to the National Academy of Sciences in 1983, and the Institute of Medicine in 1989, as well as the Bristol Myers Squibb/Mead Johnson Award for Distinguished Achievement in Nutrition Research, and the Distinguished Achievement Award from the American Heart Association Council on Arteriosclerosis. He made major contributions to medicine through his many advisory positions and editorships, as well as numerous invited lectureships around the world. He served as Editor in Chief of the Journal of Lipid Research from 1972 to 1975, and as Chair of its Advisory Board from 1982 to 1992. Perhaps his greatest legacy lies in the careers of a large number of investigators who trained in his laboratory and with the SCOR group, who are now distinguished academicians in so many countries. Dick will be greatly missed by his family and many friends and colleagues around the world.