

# Melvin D. Yahr (1917–2004):

## A Life Dedicated to Parkinson's Disease and Neurology

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This tribute to Dr. Yahr was the subject of a Grand Rounds Lecture on December 14, 2004.



IT WAS ONLY A YEAR AGO that Dr. Melvin Yahr introduced as a speaker, in a special lecture and grand rounds, a long-time friend of his and one of his great intellectual partners, Dr. Arvid Carlsson, the 2000 Nobel laureate who first demonstrated that Parkinson's disease is characterized by a loss of dopaminergic innervation.

This discovery, made in the 1960s, led to what is still the most effective treatment of the disease, using the dopamine precursor L-dopa. The steps from identifying the biochemical defect to translating the discovery into an effective treatment were arduous, and Melvin Yahr was among the very first not only to conduct laboratory and clinical experiments with dopa, but to apply his clinical scientific knowledge to refine the form of dopa that could be tolerated (L-dopa), and to conduct the first controlled trials of the drug. He was also one of the first

to recognize that this miraculous treatment for Parkinson's had long-term complications, e.g., the motor response fluctuations and dyskinesias, phenomena that remain puzzling and unexplained.

I had the good fortune of working with Dr. Yahr, first during my residency at Mount Sinai, when he was chairman of the department, and then as his fellow in Movement Disorders in 1991–1993. Like many other neurologists that he trained in his long career, I quickly learned that behind his serious and challenging personality there was a man of encyclopedic knowledge and passion for his work, with an ardent scientific curiosity that he would apply to clinical cases presented to him on rounds or to scientific or theoretical questions on the brain.

Generation after generation of his students retain the fondest memories of Dr. Yahr, not only for his clinical and scientific acumen and achievements, but also for his exemplary and uncompromising ethics, loyalty, empathy, and great love of humanity.

At times, after rounds or after seeing patients, he would share stories of his earlier years, including childhood memories of anti-Semitism, memories that instilled in him his sense of social justice and the need for physicians to be engaged in the fight for civil rights and health care rights. Among his little-known achievements was his early support for women and minorities in academic medicine, and his lifelong fight for the rights of patients to receive the best medical care regardless of their social and economic status.

A native New Yorker, Dr. Yahr graduated from New York University Medical School in 1943 and completed his residency at Montefiore Hospital. After serving in the armed forces he joined the Department of Neurology at Columbia University, where he built the first Parkinson's disease center, a legacy that continues to this day. In 1973 he stepped down from the positions of associate dean and Houston Merritt Professor of Neurology at Columbia to become chairman of Neurology at Mount Sinai, a position that he held until he retired in 1992. He remained active as chairman emeritus and professor of neurology until his death.

In addition to his fundamental role in the creation of the field of Parkinson's disease, Dr. Yahr established the first NIH-funded Clinical Research and Education Center in the US, which he led for more than 20 years. He also served as president of the American Neurological Association and the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, was on the editorial board of many scientific journals, and was chairman of the board of trustees of the Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Disorders. He played an essential role in the creation of the Parkinson's Disease Foundation, and subsequently founded the World Federation of Neurology Committee on Parkinsonism and Related Disorders, which he led until 2001. The many awards and honors that he received from universities around the world offer further testimony to his role in creating and defining the field of Parkinson's disease.

He will be missed at Mount Sinai, in the Parkinson's disease community, and in the neurological and scientific world at large. It will be the duty of us, his students, to carry into the future his passion, humanity, and visionary sense of care and intellectual pursuit.

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