

J. Donald Capra, M.D., AAI '70

1937-2015

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J. Donald "Don" Capra, M.D.

Photo provided by the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation

On February 24, 2015, at the age of 77, J. Donald "Don" Capra, M.D., president emeritus of the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation, died of a malignant glioblastoma.

For countless immunologists, Don was a pundit, enthusiast, and confidant. He was a member of The American Association of Immunologists (AAI) for more than three decades and served AAI as Secretary-Treasurer for two terms from 1997 to 2003. As an officer of AAI, he was a voting member of the AAI Council. Capra was also a member and chair of the AAI Finance Committee (1997–2003), member (1975–1977) and chair (1990–1994) of the AAI Program Committee, member (1985) and chair (1989) of the AAI Nominating Committee, and a member of the AAI Committee on Public Affairs (1989–1991). In addition, Capra was an Associate Editor (1974–1977) and Section Editor (1982–1985) for *The Journal of Immunology* and an AAI delegate to the International Union of Immunological Societies General Assembly (2001).

In recognition of his contributions to AAI as AAI Program Committee Chair, he received the AAI Distinguished Service Award in 1993.

Capra was a founding member and past president of the Henry Kunkel Society and a Fellow of the American

Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, the Association of American Physicians, and the American Society for Clinical Investigation, where he also served as a Councilor from 1980 to 1982.

Don was born on July 20, 1937, in Burlington, Vermont, to Italian immigrant parents. He grew up in Barre, Vermont, where he graduated from Spaulding High School in 1955. He attended the University of Vermont in Burlington, earning his B.S. in chemistry and his M.D. summa cum laude in 1963. As a medical student,

Don worked in the laboratory of Dr. Tom Tomasi, another Italian immunologist from Barre. Don often credited Dr. Tomasi with sparking his interest in science and launching his career in the then-nascent field of immunology. It was there that Don discovered secretory IgA, and he maintained an interest in immunoglobulins throughout his distinguished and prolific career.

With more than 375 publications and as principal investigator of 72 NIH grants, Don's studies on the structure and function of immunoglobulins helped lay the foundation for the field of

monoclonal antibody therapy, which has revolutionized care of select malignancies, inflammatory arthritides, and infectious diseases. He described himself as a physician and a scientist, crediting his clinical training with informing his scientific pursuits and his scientific inquisitiveness with influencing his clinical care.

After completing his medical residency at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City, he spent two years at the National Institutes of Health in the laboratory of Dr. Alan Peterkofsky, where his research on tRNA provided a foundation for his later contributions to understanding antibody sequences, rearrangements, and somatic mutations. From 1967-1969, his work



Photo courtesy of Beckman Coulter

with Dr. Henry Kunkel at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (now Rockefeller University) established his life-long interests in the fields of autoimmune disease and lymphocytic malignancies.

In 1969, Don was recruited to be one of the first faculty members at the new Mt. Sinai Medical School. Interpreting findings on immunoglobulin protein sequences in the context of genetic, serologic, and crystallographic observations, he made discoveries and novel hypotheses that unified three fundamental concepts in immunoglobulin biology: the antibody combining site, antibody idiotype, and the hypervariable region. In 1974 Don was recruited to the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center as a professor of Microbiology. The latter years of his scientific research career were spent defining the subsets of human B cells. As a result of these studies, many human B cell malignancies were reclassified.

In 1997, Don was named president of the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation (OMRF). His leadership at OMRF was transformative. He threw his support behind young scientists, and his vision drew investigators from across the United States to Oklahoma City. As a result, the size of the foundation grew by fifty percent. He also directed his boundless energy, persuasive enthusiasm, and intense persistence to developing scientific programs and securing funding. During his nine-year tenure, NIH funding at OMRF increased from \$8 million to \$25 million. He successfully led a \$100 million fundraising campaign. At the same time, his dedication to science advocacy impacted research programs far beyond OMRF as he worked to educate policy makers in Oklahoma and in Washington about the importance of basic biomedical research.

After retiring as OMRF president in 2006, Don became widely known as a phenomenal research mentor. He generously shared his broad knowledge and keen intellect to help junior investigators hone and refine their research. Don's advice came in words that were not only frank and honest but also encouraging and heartfelt. He genuinely wanted

people to succeed, and he was vigorously supportive of his trainees: over his career, 26 obtained their doctorate degrees under his tutelage, and nearly 100 more finished their training as postdoctoral fellows in his laboratory. His students and mentees are each a testimony to his professional and personal legacy. Don was also a life mentor, and was himself a connoisseur of life — a vibrant optimist who treasured family, colleagues, and new experiences.

He is survived by his wife of 57 years, Dr. Patricia Hollister Capra. Their profound and unconditional love was an inspiration to many. He is also survived by his sons Jay and Tony as well as three grandchildren. Don was exceptionally devoted to his family, and our sympathy is with them.

Cicero tells us, “The life given us by nature is short, but the memory of a well-spent life is eternal.” So be it with Don Capra.

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