

Dr. Roy Laver Swank

1909–2008



Dr. Roy Laver Swank, Neurologist and Professor Emeritus at the Oregon Health & Sciences University, died peacefully at home in Portland, on Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008. He was 99 years old. Dr. Swank had a distinguished career as an innovative medical researcher and clinician who had the respect of the world wide medical community. He was devoted to his patients and gifted with wide ranging research interests. Ultimately his

main research focus was on the etiology and treatment of multiple sclerosis where he pioneered a radical approach to treating multiple sclerosis using diet. It has proven to be the most effective treatment for multiple sclerosis to date based on clinical evidence from thousands of patients in his care dating from the late 1940s. Although this was a primary focus of his research and patient care, his research interests were multifaceted. These included work that led to some of the original findings on the relationship between diet and cardiovascular disease and atherosclerosis. His research culminated in over 170 scientific papers as well as the publication of several books on diet and multiple sclerosis including "The Swank MS Diet Book" which is still in print.

Dr. Swank was a positive and lively man with a perpetual spring in his step, a robust sense of humor, full of boundless curiosity and optimism, always anxious to go where his interests led him. He had a passion for skiing, music, both listening to and playing jazz piano, and was an avid student of history.

He was born on March 5, 1909, in Camas, Wash., to Wilmer and Hannah Laver Swank. He spent his growing up years in Camas, close to his parents and a diverse and devoted set of aunts and uncles, either helping on his uncle's farm or courting his future wife, Eulalia Shively, in his father's mortuary hearse. But it was his relationship with one of Camas' oldest and well-respected physicians, Dr. Donald Urie, which stimulated his interest in medicine. This began very early when, at the age of 13, he would drive Dr. Urie around town and accompany him on his rounds. He graduated from Camas High School in 1926 where he lettered in football and participated in school politics and the school newspaper. He went on to the University of Washington, graduating in 1930 with a Bachelor of Science degree. This was followed by medical school at Northwestern University where he received his medical degree in 1935 as well as a Ph.D. in Anatomy from its graduate school. While at Northwestern he became a member of the medical fraternity, Alpha Kappa Kappa. His internship followed immediately at Passavant Memorial Hospital in Chicago, 1934-36. At the end of his internship he was elected to the Society of Sigma Xi for his research in science. It was during this time that he married Eulalia, who had by then become a registered nurse. He took his residency at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston, Mass., 1937-39. He received a fellowship in Pathology in 1939 at Harvard Medical School along with a Commonwealth Fellowship in Neurology. The next two years were spent at the Montreal Neurological Institute. This took him to Norway, his first of what would be many trips abroad for research and for his numerous international speaking engagements at medical conferences. He returned to Boston in 1941 to the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital but in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, enlisted in the United States Army in 1942 and went to Europe with the Fifth General Hospital, Harvard University Unit. Ultimately Dr. Swank found himself in charge of a 1500 bed psychiatric hospital in Paris, France, following its liberation. His work with soldiers suffering from shell shock and battle fatigue led to his writing some of the first papers published on this war time syndrome. Following his discharge from the army in 1946 and until 1948, he returned to Peter Bent Brigham.

In 1948 he left Boston for the Montreal Neurological Institute again, where he worked with Dr. Wilder Penfield, Director of the Montreal Neurological Institute, who invited him to Montreal to undertake studies on multiple sclerosis. It was during this time that a number of clues to the disease became apparent to him. The first was a suggestion of a vascular cause as an explanation for sudden relapses that occurred in cases. There also appeared to be a link between the incidence of the

disease and geographic location and diet. Nutritional studies following World War II showed a substantial variation in fat consumption in various parts of the world that appeared to point to a correlation between high fat intake and the frequency of multiple sclerosis. His research that followed led ultimately to the development of the Swank MS diet for treating this disease. During these six years in Montreal he began working with his first group of patients with multiple sclerosis, many of whom he followed for the rest of his career. Eventually his patients came from all over the United States and the world.

In 1954 he was recruited by the University of Oregon Medical School, now the Oregon Health & Sciences University, to establish and lead the Division of Neurology in the Department of Medicine. His desire to return to his beloved Northwest in addition to having the freedom to create this department and continue his research, brought him to Portland where he spent the rest of his life. His gratitude and commitment to OHSU led him and his wife to establish the Dr. Roy and Eulalia Swank Family Research Professorship in Neurology. While on sabbatical in 1962 doing research at the University of Cologne, Germany, he was the first American invited to represent the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, at a centuries old disputation ceremony for a doctoral candidate.

It was during an experiment he was doing on shock treatment in animals in 1967 that led to the development of a transfusion filter and subsequently a cardiovascular blood filter. An emergency transfusion was needed during the experiment and the only blood available was past its viability. In order to avoid potential problems caused by the aggregation of old blood, Dr. Swank jury rigged a filter using a funnel and cotton, and dealt successfully with this emergency. This stimulated an interest in finding a way to extend the viability of blood and he developed a screen filtration pressure machine to measure particulate matter in fluids, specifically blood as it begins to break down. This led to more tinkering which ultimately resulted in the first prototype of the Swank transfusion filter. This filter continues to be the most effective of its kind. Subsequently this was followed by the development of the Swank cardiovascular blood filter, one of the most reliable and effective filters used in cardiovascular surgery. The development of these two filters which began in his laboratory eventually found its way to his basement where he built clean rooms to protect them during their manufacturing, enlisting the help of his father-in-law to wash the Dacron wool which he found to be the most effective filtering material. When the operation expanded beyond the basement walls, he moved it to a building in Beaverton, and officially established Pioneer Filters, a company that lasted until it was sold to British Oxygen in 1977. Seven patents resulted from the development of these filters.

He served as Head of the Division of Neurology from 1954 until 1974 when he officially retired from the university. However he continued his patient care and research in his private clinic until it closed in 1999. During this time, the Swank MS Foundation was established to continue support for patients and for research on multiple sclerosis. During his active years he received multiple research grants and mentored numerous colleagues. He was the consummate researcher, believing that in order for the intellectual and creative spirit to flourish and new discoveries to find their place, it was critical that constraints be few and financial support be generous. His was an extraordinary contribution to his patients, his field, OHSU and the medical community nationally and internationally. His work continues to have a vast ripple effect and will into the future.

He was preceded in death by his first wife, Eulalia, mother of his three children; his two sons, Robert and Stephen; son-in-law, Joel Keizer; and his second wife, Betty Swank. He is survived by his wife, Leeanna Kirksey-Swank; his daughter, Susan Keizer of Davis, Calif., step-son, Kirksey Neumeyer of Portland; grandchildren, Sidney Keizer of Novato, Calif., and Sarah Keizer of San Francisco; granddaughter-in-law, Noelle Kaneshiro of Novato, Calif.; and three great-grandchildren, Justin, Alec and Natalie Keizer of Novato, Calif.

The family requests that any contributions be made to a choice of the following: The Swank MS Foundation, P.O. Box 1658, Beaverton, OR 97075; the American Red Cross; or Providence Hospice, 6410 NE Halsey, Suite 300, Portland, OR 97213.

There will be a celebration of his life at a later date.

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