

# Milton Wexler, Psychoanalyst and Hereditary Disease Foundation Founder, Dies at 98

By Elizabeth Stump

**M**ilton Wexler, PhD, a Los Angeles psychoanalyst and the founder of the Hereditary Disease Foundation (HDF), died at his home from respiratory failure on Mar. 16, at age 98. Following his wife Leonore's diagnosis with Huntington disease (HD) in the 1960s, Wexler began a mission to find the cure for HD; in 1993, his efforts were rewarded when scientists identified the gene that causes the disease.

Born in San Francisco in 1908 and reared in New York City, Wexler earned a law degree from New York University before studying psychology at Columbia University and becoming one of the country's first lay psychoanalysts in the 1930s.

After Navy service in World War II, Dr. Wexler treated schizophrenics at the Menninger Foundation in Kansas. In 1951, he established a private practice in Los Angeles to help support his three brothers-in-law who were diagnosed with HD. For over 50 years, Wexler practiced psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, treating both struggling artists and well-known stars in Hollywood.

## RECRUITING OTHERS TO THE CAUSE

When his wife was diagnosed with HD in the late 60s, Dr. Wexler joined Marjorie Guthrie — the widow of folk singer Woody Guthrie, who had HD — to campaign for HD research. In 1968 he established the Hereditary Disease Foundation (HDF), to support research on the causes and treatments for HD and similar inherited disorders. He recruited many well-known actors and directors, including Julie Andrews and Blake Edwards, as trustees and supporters of the organization.

Dr. Wexler's strategy of gathering young scientists for freewheeling, inter-



**Dr. Milton Wexler (1908-2007), with daughters Nancy (left) and Alice Wexler (right).**

disciplinary brainstorming discussions was modeled on psychiatric group therapy sessions. The workshops attracted a diversified bounty of research scientists, including Nobel laureate and DNA pioneer James Watson.

"Milton Wexler was a giant in our midst," said Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD, the director of the NIH National Human Genome Research Institute. Dr. Collins attended Dr. Wexler's workshops in the 1980s and ultimately joined the consortium of seven research groups that struggled to identify the HD gene. "Milton's genius was the way in which he structured these workshops," Dr. Collins told *Neurology Today* in an e-mail. "There was no agenda and no slides were allowed...he encouraged the free flow of ideas to break out as soon as possible."

## THE QUEST FOR THE GENE

Dr. Wexler, chairman of the founda-

tion's board for nearly forty years, oversaw Leonore's care until she died in 1978. When in 1972 he learned of a village in Venezuela where several generations of families with HD lived with the disease, his daughters Nancy, Higgins Professor of Neuropsychology in the Departments of Neurology and Psychiatry at Columbia University, and Alice, a historian, journeyed to the site to collect samples and chart family histories. Nancy Wexler is the current President of the HDF.

From the blood samples accumulated during the research project, Nancy Wexler, PhD; James Gusella, PhD, a molecular geneticist at Harvard; and a team of 150 investigators located the marker for the Huntington disease gene on the tip of chromosome 4 in 1983. The gene's final isolation occurred a decade later. The HD gene discovery demonstrated the feasibility of mapping the entire human genome, which was com-

pleted in 2003.

Alice Wexler told *Neurology Today*, "My father always held before us the ideal taking on big challenges, of being willing to take risks. He had high aspirations, and admired those who went for broke, who did not settle for less than they had to, and who refused to compromise on what was really important."

Other investigators expressed their sense of loss at Wexler's passing. "Milton was a hero to me, a visionary who was creative and effective beyond imagination," said 2002 Nobel Laureate H. Robert Horvitz, PhD, professor of biology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. He "had the ability to make the serious problem of studying a deadly disease fun for those involved. He was brilliant and engaging, with a spark and a wit that was unparalleled."

"For me personally, working with the HDF and with Milton and Nancy changed the direction of my research and influenced the way in which I do research, always with a sense of urgency in finding treatments or a cure for HD and to work collaboratively with other investigators in the field," said Leslie Thompson, PhD, associate professor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Biological Chemistry, and Neurobiology and Behavior at the University of California-Irvine.

Dr. Collins added: "Continuing his nurturing role well into his 90s, Milton never lost his ability to inspire researchers, applying the warm Milton Wexler recipe of optimism and exhortation. Though he did not live to see his dream of a cure for HD come true, all who labor to achieve that ultimate goal will be beneficiaries of his legacy." ■

## Alternative Stem Cell Bill

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exclusion of embryonic cells is nebulous," he said.

## 'SCANT HOPE FOR PATIENTS'

Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute, the leading nonprofit organization dedicated to establishing a positive legal framework for advancing stem cell research, called the HOPE bill a "political cover so politicians can go back to their constituents and boast that they are supporting 'ethical' stem cell research."

In a press statement, Siegel, an attorney, charged that the bill fails to address the urgent need for new cell lines.

"In reality, it offers scant hope to patients. Utilizing insidious language directly taken from the talking point playbook of the research foes, the bill would drive the [NIH] to push dubious research alternatives to embryonic stem cell research."

At a March hearing on the 2008 budget for the NIH, NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni, MD, said the current federal policy is hampering US progress in what is likely to become a major source of novel therapies in the future for a wide range of human disease.

While stem cell lines developed prior to President Bush's 2001 prohibition initially appeared sufficient to advance the science, developments since that time have shown the candidate cell lines "are not going to cut it," he told lawmakers Mar. 19.

"I think it's important for us not to function with one hand tied behind our back here," Dr. Zerhouni said. "To sideline NIH in an issue of such importance is shortsighted," he told Senate lawmakers.

"From my standpoint, it is clear today that American science will be better served, and the nation will be better served, if we allow our scientists access

to more cell lines," the NIH Director said. "It's time for policymakers to find common ground and for our country to move forward on all fronts of stem cell research, using all cell lines from embryonic to adult."

The current policy, set in 2001, limits the number of embryonic stem cell lines that are eligible for federal funding.

"Senator Coleman is looking...to disguise his opposition to meaningful stem cell research," commented Sean Tipton, president of the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, in a press release. "The Coleman bill reads like it was written by the Bush Administration." ■