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Milton Wexler, Groundbreaker on Huntington's, Dies at 98

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Milton Wexler, a psychoanalyst who applied his talent for conducting group therapy to brainstorming sessions for scientists working on the hereditary disease that ravaged his wife's family, died on March 16 at his home in Santa Monica, Calif. He was 98.



Courtesy of Frank Gehry

Milton Wexler, in January.

The cause was complications of pneumonia, his daughter Nancy Wexler said.

Dr. Wexler was a psychoanalyst to Hollywood stars, famous artists and architects and other luminaries when his former wife contracted Huntington's disease, a rare, incurable genetic disorder.

It had killed her father and three brothers. Dr. Wexler learned there was a 50-50 chance that Nancy and their other daughter, Alice Wexler, would get the disease, which is always fatal.

He formed the Hereditary Disease Foundation to gather young scientists from different disciplines and institutions for freewheeling talks about Huntington's as well as to sponsor research.

“I became an activist because I was terribly selfish,” Dr. Wexler said in an interview with The Los Angeles Times in 1999. “I was scared to death one of my daughters would get it, too.”

His strategy was one he developed for group therapy among creative people: no-holds-barred discussion toward a common purpose in a nonthreatening climate.

“His expertise was in the world of creativity,” said David E. Housman, the Ludwig professor of biology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a participant in the sessions.

The research that emerged “changed everything in the world of genetic disease,” Dr. Housman said, adding that many influential scientists had not expected so much progress for 100 years.

Researchers affiliated with the foundation in 1983 found the “marker,” or approximate location, of the gene for Huntington’s disease. A decade later, they identified the gene.

Milton Wexler was born on Aug. 24, 1908, in San Francisco, where his father had gone to cash in on a post-earthquake real estate boom. When that fizzled, the family returned to New York.

Milton graduated from Syracuse University, then earned a law degree from New York University. Soon bored with law, he earned a doctorate in psychology from Columbia. After Navy service, he joined the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kan., where he specialized in research and treatment involving schizophrenia.

In 1950, he moved to Los Angeles to practice psychoanalysis to support his three brothers-in-law, who all had what was then called Huntington’s chorea.

In 1962, he divorced the former Leonore Sabin, not knowing that she also had Huntington’s. Their daughter Nancy said he had become discouraged over her depression, which was actually a symptom of the disease.

Six years later, a Los Angeles police officer stopped Leonore for apparent inebriation; the disease made her wobble. She immediately called her ex-husband, still a friend, for help. He devoted himself to her care until her death 10 years later.

In the late 1960s, Dr. Wexler joined forces with Marjorie Guthrie, wife of the songwriter Woody Guthrie, who had died of the disease, to help others with Huntington’s. Dr. Wexler started his own foundation in 1974 and began his free-association sessions.

He paid each researcher only \$1,000 and expenses, but sweetened the deal by inviting them to parties with movie stars. His Hollywood connections included writing two screenplays with Blake Edwards, “The Man Who Loved Women” and “That’s Life!”

Dr. Wexler is survived by his two daughters, Nancy, of Manhattan, who is deeply involved in the foundation's work, and Alice, of Santa Monica, who wrote a book about the disease. Fearing that they might carry and pass on their mother's defective gene, both chose not to have children.

But they do not definitely know, because they declined to take the test that research by their father's foundation made possible. There is still no cure, and he convinced them that there was nothing to be gained by having the test.

"If the gods want to drive you mad, first they tell you your future," Dr. Wexler said.