



Sidney Farber, M.D.
1903–1973

OBITUARY

Sidney Farber, M.D.

On the evening of March 30, 1973, Dr. Sidney Farber, President, Director of Research, and Founder (in 1947) of The Children's Cancer Research Foundation, Inc., and S. Burt Wolbach Professor of Pathology, Emeritus, Harvard Medical School, died in his office. In recent years he had often expressed his hope to me that he might "die in harness," which he did, having spent more than 2 of the last hours of his life with Emil Frei, III, and me discussing future plans for the Foundation. American medicine has lost one of its most illustrious figures, and cancer and biomedical research around the world has lost a remarkably articulate and effective medical statesman and spokesman.

Born on September 30, 1903, in Buffalo, N. Y., into a family of 14 children, Sidney Farber was graduated from the University of Buffalo in 1923. He took his first year of medical training at the Universities of Heidelberg and Freiburg, entered Harvard Medical School as a second-year student, and was graduated with the Class of 1927. Following graduate training in pathology at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, he was appointed Resident Pathologist at The Children's Hospital and Assistant in Pathology at Harvard Medical School in 1928. His affiliations with these institutions proved to be lifelong and continuous, with the exception of study in Germany in 1928-1929 as Guest Assistant at the Pathological Institute, University of Munich, and in 1935-1936, when as Harvard's Moseley Traveling Fellow, he worked with Professor C. Heymans in the Laboratories of Pharmacodynamics, University of Ghent, Belgium.

In 1929 Dr. Farber was appointed Instructor in Pathology at Harvard Medical School and became the first full-time pathologist at The Children's Hospital where, as a disciple of the late Dr. S. Burt Wolbach, then Professor of Pathology at Harvard Medical School, he developed a close friendship which endured even after Wolbach's retirement in 1947. Trained by Wolbach, a great general pathologist, he symbolized for pediatric pathology the kind of specialized pathologist who recognized the advantages of specialization within the broader field of pathology. His dynamic presentations and lucid lectures emphasized a transition in pathology from static anatomic and histological descriptions to a narrative of the dynamic biological events occurring during the course of human disease. His pathology laboratory was the epitome of precision and tidiness, and his lectures on the history and application of the autopsy to medicine, like his 1937 book, *The Postmortem Examination*, remain classics to this day. His bibliography of more than 270 publications contains a series of classic descriptions of pediatric disease.

Dr. Farber and his colleagues first described cystic fibrosis as a generalized disorder; described the occurrence of Eastern equine encephalitis in man; drew attention more than 40 years ago to the importance of hyaline membrane disease in the newborn; wrote the primary classic descrip-

tion of transposition of the great vessels, a major contribution to the development of pediatric cardiac surgery; and focused attention on the sudden death syndrome in infants.

In 1946, Dr. Farber became Chairman of the Division of Laboratories and Research, The Children's Hospital and, in 1947, was named Pathologist-in-Chief. Harvard Medical School appointed him Professor of Pathology in 1948 and, in 1967, he became the first incumbent of the newly created S. Burt Wolbach Professorship in Pathology.

In 1946, The Children's Hospital named him Chairman of the Staff Planning Committee; and in 1964, he was named Chairman of the Staff, with responsibility for the planning and policy of The Children's Hospital Medical Center. His vision and conceptual organization of an Institute of Pediatric Pathology has finally taken form in the Pediatric Research Building at The Children's Hospital Medical Center, a gathering of medical and scientific resources which in his words "would be dedicated to the prevention and care of diseases of childhood, and to research and medical education."

Dr. Farber's interest in cancer—its biology and natural history as well as its pathology—coupled with his refusal to accept the then common reaction of overwhelming hopelessness and inactivity occasioned by its diagnosis, led very early in his life to what are perhaps his greatest contributions. Immediately after World War II, in the Department of Pathology at The Children's Hospital, he undertook studies of the stimulatory effects on the bone marrow of what was then known as "folic acid," which had been isolated and characterized by the late Dr. Y. Subbarow. These experiments led him to ask Subbarow to synthesize an "antagonist" to "folic acid," venturing the prediction that such a compound might be useful for the treatment of acute leukemia. In consequence, Subbarow synthesized the first antimetabolite of "folic acid," aminopterin; its preclinical and clinical evaluation resulted in a milestone in the annals of medical history. A *New England Journal of Medicine* report in 1948 described for the first time the induction of complete hematological remission in children with acute leukemia following treatment with a chemical agent, clearly identifying Sidney Farber as the father of the modern era of chemotherapy of neoplastic disease.

Based upon these beginnings, and with the continuing support of the Variety Clubs of New England, The Children's Cancer Research Foundation was conceived and organized in 1947. This now world-famous institution (known as the "Jimmy Fund") was the first to be devoted to the study and care of children with neoplastic disease, particularly the acute leukemias.

Dr. Farber's concepts, firmly grounded in the importance of preclinical research and devotion to patient and family, resulted more than 25 years ago in the development of the concept of "total care," a concept now ac-

Obituary

cepted throughout the world. In 1955, another therapeutic triumph was announced, the induction of remission in children with metastatic Wilms' tumor following therapy with actinomycin D and X-irradiation. Program scope and needs continued to grow and, during these busy years, Dr. Farber became a primary force in the development of still another new concept to improve the quality of care provided to the patient with cancer, that of regional centers.

In support of his own concepts, and with the support of his Board of Trustees and initiating support from The Dana Foundation, construction of The Charles A. Dana Cancer Center (see photograph) was undertaken in 1971 to provide facilities to extend Foundation services to adult patients with neoplastic disease. And on June 20, 1973, his dream was fulfilled—the Foundation was designated as a Comprehensive Cancer Center by the National Cancer Institute.

Dr. Farber's participation and interest in health and biomedical research on the national level covered a span of more than 20 years, with his service on various study sections and councils of the NIH, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. He served as a member of the National Advisory Cancer Council for 15 years and the National Advisory Health Council for 4 years. In each of these more than 20 years, he testified before the Appropriations Committees of the House and Senate of the Congress of the United States concerning the needs of the country for the support of medical and biomedical research and education. He was instrumental in establishing the Cancer Chemotherapy National Committee in 1955 and served as its first chairman for 7 years. This Committee was responsible for the implementation of the Cancer Chemotherapy National Service Center at the National Cancer Institute. In 1959 he served on the Committee of Consultants on Medical Research to the United States Senate, which recommended many of the innovations developed at the NIH for the support of medical and biomedical research and education, *e.g.*, the Career Research Awards, Clinical Research Centers, Program Project Grants, and General Research Support. During 1959–1964 he was a member of the World Health Organization Expert Advisory Panel on Cancer. In 1964 and 1965 he served as Chairman of the Panel on Cancer, on the President's Commission on Heart Disease, Cancer, and Stroke. In 1969 and 1970 he served as Co-Chairman of a National Panel of Consultants on the Conquest of Cancer as part of the then developing National Program for the Conquest of Cancer, which resulted in the National Cancer Act of 1971. At the time of his death, he was a member of the National Cancer Advisory Board which had been created in consequence to this legislation.

Like his activities on the national scene, Dr. Farber's participation in the activities of voluntary health agencies was all-encompassing. He was Life Honorary Chairman of the Research Advisory Board, United Cerebral Palsy Association; first Chairman of the Research Advisory Board of the National Cystic Fibrosis Association; and a Past Member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Muscular Dystrophy Association. He was always available for "instant consultation" or more extensive participation in any kind

of activity relating to health, particularly the health of children. He was a staunch advocate of all biomedical research oriented to the alleviation of human suffering and disease. His interest in the more sociological aspects of life and education was second only to his devotion to medicine and biomedical research. He was a member of The Board of Directors, Belgian-American Education Foundation; a Trustee of Brandeis University; the Southwest Foundation for Research and Education, the Lahey Clinic; and was Past-President of the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology.

The honors bestowed upon him by his colleagues and a grateful society were equally as numerous as his activities. He was the recipient of nine honorary degrees: three M.D., 4 Sc. D., and one L.H.D.; the bestowal of this last by Brandeis University was a particular source of pleasure to him. He was awarded the Selective Service Medal by the Congress of the United States for faithful and loyal services during World War II; was elected to the Royal Academy of Medicine, Ghent, Belgium; and was the recipient of La Décoration de Chevalier de l'Ordre de Léopold-Baudoin, Roi des Belges. His scientific awards numbered more than 20, including the Judd Award (cancer research); Max Weinstein Award (cerebral palsy); Annual Medal of the Massachusetts Division, American Cancer Society; Great Medal of the University of Ghent; Modern Medicine Award (chemotherapy); Lasker Award (chemotherapy); Guy H. Heath and Dan C. Heath Memorial Award (patient care); Oscar B. Hunter Award (therapeutics); Annual National Award of the American Cancer Society; Jurzykowski Award (medical science); Great Heart Award, Variety Clubs of New England; Humanitarian Award, Variety Clubs International; Boston Medal; Papanicolaou Award (cancer research); and a Certificate of Award from the American Association for Cancer Research for his contributions to cancer research.

As with the list of advisory and consulting appointments, honorary and visiting lectureships, editorial appointments, and miscellaneous voluntary responsibilities he assumed over the years, his memberships in scientific societies are too numerous to detail. He was Past-President of the American Cancer Society (National), American Association of Pathologists and Bacteriologists, Society for Pediatric Research, New England Pathology Society, Boston Pathology Society, Association of American Cancer Institutes, and the Pediatric Pathology Club. He was a Fellow of the American College of Pathologists, a Diplomate of the American Board of Pathology, an Honorary Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

There was a side to this man's indomitable personality which was perhaps known only to his closest associates. His compassion and understanding were unsurpassable not only in his role as a physician to the sick of the world, but also in his relationships with his associates and colleagues. Those closest to him knew him as a warm, considerate, generous friend, a wise counselor with a well-disguised sense of humor, a devotee of mystery stories written by literate authors, and a loving father and grandfather devoted to his family. His generosity, praise, and support

were provided with gentle voice in a persuasive and convincing manner. Nonetheless, his criticisms were devastatingly objective. He excelled in his ability to separate fact from "fuzzy thinking," always holding that concepts, like experiments, can be developed meaningfully only on the basis of complete objectivity, by separating arguments originating in human failings from those that further a cause.

The esteem in which Dr. Farber was held by his Staff and close associates is evidenced by the establishment in 1968 of The Sidney Farber Medical Research Award, by those professional colleagues associated with the Foundation during its first 20 years. This award, presented by the Trustees and Staff of the Foundation, may be made to an "individual—or any group of individuals—anywhere in the world—who has made significant contributions to medical science, or to its development, furtherance, and support."

Much to his obvious embarrassment, the prototype of this award was presented to him by his Staff, "as a token of our esteem and appreciation for you, and your innumer-

able contributions to medicine, to medical research and to the society of men in which we live . . . Suffice it to say, that this decision of the Organizing Committee has provided the Foundation with unassailable criteria by which the accomplishments of future potential candidates for this Award must be measured in the years to come—and thereby creating—to paraphrase Onasander [in *The General*, Chapter 42, paragraph 25]—*for these future potential candidates—a pain of mind that successful men cause their neighbors.*"

The American Association for Cancer Research extends its sympathy to his beloved wife Norma (Holzman) whom he married in 1928; their children, Ellen (Santis), Stephen, Thomas, and Miriam; their grandchildren, Wendy, Peter, and William Santis; and his colleagues and associates at the Foundation, The Children's Hospital Medical Center, and Harvard Medical School.

George E. Foley, Sc.D.
Children's Cancer Research Foundation, Inc.
Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Cancer Research

The Journal of Cancer Research (1916–1930) | The American Journal of Cancer (1931–1940)

Sidney Farber, M.D.

George E. Foley

Cancer Res 1974;34:658-661.

Updated version Access the most recent version of this article at:
<http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/34/3/658.citation>

E-mail alerts [Sign up to receive free email-alerts](#) related to this article or journal.

Reprints and Subscriptions To order reprints of this article or to subscribe to the journal, contact the AACR Publications Department at pubs@aacr.org.

Permissions To request permission to re-use all or part of this article, use this link <http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/34/3/658.citation>. Click on "Request Permissions" which will take you to the Copyright Clearance Center's (CCC) Rightslink site.