

Daniel Steinberg, MD, PhD (1923–2015)

Daniel Steinberg, MD, PhD, was one of a few founders of the modern fields of cholesterol and atherosclerosis. After completion of his doctoral work, he joined the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1951. Over the next 17 years at NIH, Dr. Steinberg headed a creative laboratory that performed fundamental research on lipid and cholesterol metabolism.

In 1968, he moved to the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) where he headed the Division of Metabolic Diseases in the School of Medicine. He carried out research and trained many researchers in one of the most productive laboratories in the world.

From an early period of his career, Dr. Steinberg was a strong proponent of the “cholesterol hypothesis” of atherosclerosis. Beyond his research, he successfully urged the NIH to direct substantial resources to basic research in atherosclerosis and to carry out clinical trials to test the cholesterol hypothesis. His influence contributed to the initiation of the Lipid Research Clinics Coronary Primary Prevention Trial. The positive results of this trial opened the flood gates to many subsequent clinical trials. These trials leave little doubt that cholesterol lowering will reduce the risk for atherosclerotic disease and that in fact “lower is better” for cholesterol levels in reducing risk.

Dr. Steinberg was one of the fathers of the National Cholesterol Education Program. He played an influential role in launching the commercial development of statins to treat hypercholesterolemia. His research team carried out in-depth studies on the connection between lipoproteins and atherosclerosis.

In his later years, Dr. Steinberg chronicled the history of the “cholesterol hypothesis.” He persisted in the view that early intervention on high blood cholesterol is the key to eliminating atherosclerotic disease. A major part of his legacy is a host of atherosclerosis researchers around the world who trained under his mentorship. Many others were inspired by his research and his caring personality. The atherosclerosis field as a whole has been fortunate to have such a giant who remained supportive and influential to an advanced age. It must have been a source of great satisfaction to witness the advances toward preventing the scourge of atherosclerosis that has occurred over his lifetime and to know that he was a major influence on these advances.