William E. Connor, MD (1921–2009)

A pioneer in diet, lipids, and heart disease, William E. Connor, MD, passed away at his home in Portland, Ore., on October 25, 2009. He was 88.

Dr. Connor was born in Pittsburgh, but spent his childhood in Iowa, where he earned his Bachelor of Science and medical degree from the University of Iowa. After serving in the United States Army Signal Corps in Hawaii during World War II, he completed a Public Health Service Internship and residency and practiced for two years before completing an American Heart Association Research Fellowship at the University of Iowa, where he stayed on as faculty from 1958 to 1975. He moved to the Oregon Health & Science University in 1975 where he remained to the end. As a Visiting Fellow, he spent time at the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, Oxford, UK (1960), Karachi, Pakistan (1961–1962), Australia National University, Canberra (1970), and Baker Medical Institute, Melbourne, Australia (1982).

Bill was a physician scientist with a boundless curiosity that took him on a remarkable tour of the depth and breadth of lipid research. Bill's 397 publications span a 53 year research career. They began with a paper on the "idiopathic hyperlipidemia" of patients with coronary artery disease (1956), and his last (to date, published in 2012) on Smith-Lemli-Opitz syndrome (failure to synthesize cholesterol). There is almost no topic in the realm of cholesterol and dietary fat that Bill did not explore. He, and his long-time friend, colleague and analytical chemist par excellence Don Lin, measured sterols and/or other lipids in plasma, sperm, gall stones, brain, bile, feces, and skin, not to mention in butterflies and slugs. Most intriguing were their studies on the lipid composition of human "coprolites" (fossilized feces) from 500-year old Greenland mummies and from 2,000-year old desiccated samples collected from a cave in Nevada. Further south, he studied the effects of the typical American diet on lipids in the Tarahumara Indians of northern Mexico, a traditional hunter-gatherer tribe known for their day-long running games, and back home in Iowa, tracked lipids and diet in children in the Muscatine study. In addition to studies on (now garden-variety) dyslipidemias, Bill conducted multiple metabolic ward studies in patients with lipid disorders such as sitosterolemia (hyperabsorbers of plant sterols) and Smith-Lemli-Opitz syndrome. He also identified the cause of essential fatty acid deficiency in patients on total parenteral nutrition (1975), and did considerable work on the effects of dietary cholesterol on lipid metabolism. He was one of the first to study the effects of trans fatty acids on serum lipoproteins in humans (1976), and in later years became fascinated with the role of leutin and xeazanthin in macular degeneration. Of course the arena in which he is perhaps most widely known was omega-3 fatty acids. He explored their effects on human lipid and lipoprotein metabolism, arrhythmias and brain and eye development. From basic lipid metabolism to clinical medicine, Bill was the ultimate lipidologist.

Bill's wife and colleague, Sonja Connor MS, RD co-authored many papers with him, including in 1986, the now classic cookbook, "The New American Diet" (Simon and Schuster). She is currently serving as President of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (former American Dietetic Association).

Beyond his scientific interests, Bill, a life-long Quaker, was deeply committed to issues of social justice and peace, leading him to serve on the National Board of the Physicians for Social Responsibility.