Paul Fenje, MD, DPH

1915-2010

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the eradication of smallpox. Celebration of this unprecedented global initiative is tempered by the death of one of the key people behind its success, Dr. Paul Fenje, who passed away in Victoria, BC on March 18, 2010. Dr. Fenje was a leading scientist at Connaught Laboratories in Toronto and had retired just as the success of the eradication effort was assured, the timing underscoring his close personal and professional connection with the ultimate victory over “the speckled monster.”

Born in Yugoslavia in 1915, Paul Fenje received his M.D. from the University of Zagreb in 1940 and a D.P.H. in 1949 from the Institute of Hygiene in Belgrade. He later led the Department for Medical Virology at the Pasteur Institute in Yugoslavia until 1958, when he escaped from that country's Communist rule and came to Canada. Soon after, he was warmly welcomed at Connaught where he focused on vaccine development and production for smallpox as well as rabies and typhus.

Dr. Fenje's most significant contributions to public health centred around his leadership in the improvement and global standardization of smallpox vaccines, especially freeze-dried vaccine, for the World Health Organization's eradication program. In 1967, Fenje and Dr. Robert J. Wilson (a senior researcher at Connaught) were appointed Consultants to the Pan American Health Organization and Connaught was designated WHO's International Smallpox Vaccine Reference Laboratory for the western hemisphere. Their focus was to assist smallpox vaccine producers in Latin America to improve vaccine quality.

In 2003, at the Canadian Conference on Counter-Terrorism and Public Health, Dr. Fenje's contributions to the eradication effort, along with those of the late Dr. Wilson and the Director of the global program, Dr. D.A. Henderson, were given a special recognition award sponsored by the Canadian Public Health Association and Sanofi Pasteur Limited (then Aventis Pasteur). Fenje also consulted on the preparation of a new smallpox vaccine stockpile for the Canadian government derived from materials he had prepared in 1979 and placed in cold storage for possible future use.

Dr. Fenje was a vital figure in the development of vaccinology in Canada and globally and while we are saddened by his passing, we celebrate his great achievements.

For more information on Dr. Fenje's smallpox work, visit <http://healthheritageresearch.com>

Obituary provided by Christopher J. Rutt, PhD, Health Heritage Research Services