



Herbert Tabor (1918–1920): obituary.

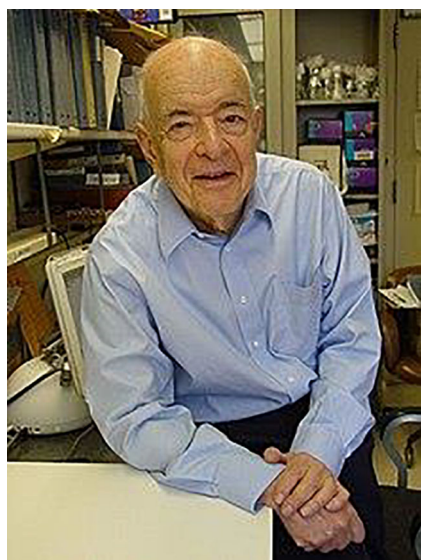
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Abstract

This invited Letter commemorates the life and scientific legacy of Dr. Herbert Tabor (1918–1920), a leading scientist at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda Maryland and former Chief Editor of the Journal of Biological Chemistry.



Dr. Herbert Tabor in his second floor laboratory of Building 8 taken in 2005 (photo credit Dr. Harry Saroff).

Herbert Tabor was born in New York City on November 28th, 1918, at the start of the “Spanish Flu” pandemic. After attending public schools in the city, he matriculated in 1935 to Harvard College, where he studied biochemical science and he entered Harvard Medical School in 1937. In his final year, Herb worked in the Department of Biological Chemistry with A. Baird Hastings to determine the ionization constant of MgHPO_4 . This work was published in *The Journal of*

Biological Chemistry, marking the beginning of his long involvement with the journal.

After graduation in 1942, Herb held an internship at Yale-New Haven Hospital, where he engaged in some laboratory work in clinical chemistry. While there, Herb performed the first therapeutic injection of penicillin in the USA, rapidly curing the patient of severe septicemia. The country being at war, in January 1943, he was commissioned in the US Public Health Service and served as medical officer on a US Coast Guard cutter, which was providing escort service to North Atlantic convoys. The following September, he was transferred to The National Institutes of Health, which had just moved to a new site in Bethesda Maryland, then a small town outside of Washington D.C. Herb was assigned to work with Sanford Rosenthal, who was interested in the electrolyte imbalance response to trauma and burn injuries and how these might be treated by administration of saline solution. In 1946, Herb married Celia White, who he had met in Boston, some years earlier. That same year, he helped form a lunch time seminar group to discuss the biochemical literature. Founding members included other biochemist luminaries such as Leon Heppel, Bernie Horecker and Arthur Kornberg.

Meetings were held every day and the seminar lasted for many years through many changes in participants. In the early 1960's, during a casual conversation at the seminar, Herb was surprised to discover the origin of the penicillin which he had administered in 1942. It had been prepared by an NIH colleague, Gil Ashwell, who had worked at Merck at the time. The drug was considered so precious, that Gil also had the job of its recovery from the patient's urine. Herb and Celia moved into commissioned officer housing, conveniently located on the NIH campus in 1949. This was just 10 min from the laboratory. This is where they raised their family and stayed for over 70 years. Celia left George Washington University in 1952 and joined Herb at NIH. They began their work together on the biosynthesis, function and genetics of polyamines in

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normal and cancerous cells. This would occupy the rest of their careers. Sanford Rosenthal retired in 1961 and Herb took over as chief of the Laboratory of Biochemical Pharmacology, NIAMD (as it then was). He held this position until 1999.

It is impossible to write about Herb Tabor without remembering his long association with *The Journal of Biological Chemistry*. He served on the editorial board from 1961 to 1966 and was appointed as an executive editor in 1968. Following the resignation of William Stein, he was promoted to editor in chief in 1971. Herb was devoted to all aspects of publishing the journal, though he did say that he was pleased that restrictions on his primary role as a civil servant got him out of many telephone calls from disgruntled authors. During his tenure, the annual output of published papers increased more than fourfold, with accompanying increases in the size of the editorial board. He was the moving force behind changing the journal to an electronic format. Initially this involved parallel publication of papers on CD-ROM in 1992. Finally, in 1995 the journal was moved onto the internet. *J. Biol. Chem.* was one of the first biological journals to make this move. Herb stood down as executive editor in 2010, assuming the title of co-editor.

During his career, Herb received many prestigious awards. Notably, in 1971, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in 1977, to the National Academy of Sciences and in 1986, the Hillebrand Award from the

American Chemical Society. Montgomery County, MD recognized his scientific achievements, by naming November 28th 2018, his hundredth birthday, as Dr. Herbert Tabor Day. Celia retired from NIH in 2005 and died in 2012. Herb never talked about retirement. Publishing his last scientific paper in 2019 (Keller et al. 2019) he passed away in his sleep on August 20th 2020, at his home on the NIH campus. He is survived by his four children, Edward, Marilyn, Richard and Stanley, together with 10 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren.

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Reference

Keller C., Chattopadhyay M. and Tabor H. (2019) Absolute requirement for polyamines for growth of *Escherichia coli* mutants (mnmE/G) defective in modification of the wobble anticodon of transfer-RNA. **FEMS microbiology letters** 366 (10) fnz110 pp.1-5

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