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Peer reviewed

Robert Katzman Honored

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In April 1976, Dr Robert Katzman published in the Archives of Neurology a landmark editorial entitled “The Prevalence and Malignancy of Alzheimer Disease: A Major Killer.” This editorial identified Alzheimer’s disease (AD) as a major public health issue for the first time, and served as a “call to action” to find the causes, treatment, and ultimate prevention of this devastating disease. On the 30th anniversary of this milestone publication, the Shiley-Marcos Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) honored the legacy of Robert Katzman by hosting a conference on the “Epidemiology of Alzheimer’s Disease” on April 28-29, 2006.

Dr Katzman’s legacy does not, of course, rest solely upon his identification of the public health impact of AD 30 years ago, for he was at the forefront of answering the “call to action” that he had proposed. Soon after the publication of his editorial, Dr Katzman and colleagues formed an “Alzheimer’s Disease Society” in New York City and began to spread the word about the disease to scientists, clinicians, and the lay public alike. His role as a self-appointed Alzheimer’s activist had begun. In 1977, he and his close colleagues Katherine Bick and Robert Terry organized a workshop-conference on AD designed to increase scientific awareness of the disease and to entice scientists from a wide variety of disciplines into carrying out clinical and basic research on the disorder. These efforts were quite successful and as information about the disease spread, lay organizations began to form across the country to advocate for patients and families affected by the disease. These beginnings led to the formation of the National Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Disorders Association, now called the Alzheimer’s Association, as of 1980. The overwhelming need and desire for this support and advocacy was brought to light in 1980 with the publication of a poignant letter to Dear Abby from “Desperate in New York.” The letter described the devastating effects of having a loved one with what the doctors had called “Alzheimer’s disease” and the feeling that no one else knew of this disorder. The letter writer asked, “Have you ever heard of Alzheimer’s disease?” Abby responded “You are not alone ... Contact the Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Disorders Association for up-to-date information,” and gave an address in New York City. In response to this advice, the Association received more than 22,000 letters from people affected by the disease. The public now had a name to put to this obviously widespread condition and the public and scientific advocacy promoted by Dr Katzman soared.

Dr Katzman has spent the 30 years since the publication of his editorial as a neurologist and clinical investigator studying AD, and as a teacher and mentor to a new generation of clinicians and scientists addressing the disease. He was department chairman at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and later at UCSD where he established large-scale research programs to study all aspects of AD, with a particular focus on clinical-pathologic correlations. Among the many contributions from his research, 3 particular findings stand out. First, he, Robert Terry, and their colleagues showed that those individuals with the pathologic changes of AD who maintained cognitive integrity had an increased brain reserve in terms of greater numbers and size of neurons. This “brain reserve” afforded some protection against

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the clinical manifestation of the disease. Second, he moved into the field of epidemiology and showed through a large-scale study in Shanghai, China that lack of education increased the risk of AD, in accordance with the brain or “cognitive” reserve hypothesis. Third, he, Robert Terry, and their colleagues demonstrated that synapse loss, rather than the numbers of plaques and tangles, is the strongest neuropathologic correlate of cognitive impairment in patients with AD. These studies represent a small fraction of Dr Katzman’s research accomplishments.

The impact of Dr Katzman’s research is widely acknowledged by the scientific community and he has received numerous awards and honors over his career. Two of his most prestigious awards were the Potamkin Prize for Research in Alzheimer’s Disease presented by the American Academy of Neurology in 1992 and the Luigi Amaducci Memorial Award from the International Psychogeriatric Association in 2003. It is a pleasure to announce that during this conference, Dr Katzman was recognized by the American Academy of Neurology Foundation as a “Giant of Neurology” with a scholarship fund for new AD investigators established in his name. Included in the articles that follow is a tribute to Dr Katzman that was presented by Dr David Drachman at this event.

The articles and commentaries being published in this special issue reflect the conference proceedings and the progress that has been made in AD epidemiologic research in the 30 years since Dr Katzman published his influential editorial. They are a testament to the extraordinary number of descriptive, analytic, observational,

and experimental epidemiologic studies that the drive to understand AD has engendered. Remarkably, the genesis of many of these studies derived from the seminal observations made by Dr Katzman, as noted throughout the manuscripts. The articles describing this research are complimented by an introduction to the tools of the epidemiologist by Dr James Mortimer, and by a commentary by Dr Zaven Khachaturian on the “History of AD Research,” which places Dr Katzman in the national scene from the 1970’s to the present day.

As we commemorate 30 years of progress, perhaps our greatest challenge for future epidemiologic research will be to thoughtfully distill the results of our studies for translation into targeted investigations that are likely to have impact on this debilitating disease that is so costly in both monetary and human terms. Thirty years ago, Robert Katzman drew our attention to the devastating consequences of AD, but the “prevalence and malignancy” of this disorder continues to be a scientific and public health challenge.

Although officially retired in 2002, Dr Katzman continues to share his wisdom with the scientific community. He continues to write books and to publish scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals, and he continues to mentor young clinicians and scientists in an informal manner. He is a faithful participant in the bi-weekly case conferences at the UCSD Shiley-Marcos Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center where, in the words of the current director, Dr Leon Thal, “When he speaks, we all listen.” Dr Robert Katzman is truly a living legend to his many colleagues across the country and around the world.