

Washington (Wash) C. Winn: In Memoriam

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Mike Miller] Hi, I'm Dr. Mike Miller. Welcome to this podcast from Emerging Infectious Diseases. Today, we want to acknowledge and celebrate the life and impact of one of our colleagues who was incredibly influential in the field of clinical microbiology – Dr. Washington Winn. His friends called him “Wash.” He was a talented pathologist, and for 34 years Dr. Winn was the director of the clinical microbiology laboratory at the University of Vermont. Joining me by phone today is Dr. David Walker from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Texas and an associate editor for Emerging Infectious Diseases. Thank you for talking with us today, David.

[David Walker] I'm pleased to be here.

[Mike Miller] Washington Winn, Jr. died suddenly and unexpectedly on July 3, 2011, at the young age of 70. Certainly he left us all a legacy of valuable contributions in microbiology and lived a life worthy of emulation by all of us. David, “Wash” had so many friends and was a wonderful person and a true gentleman, and in your tribute to him, published in the December issue of Emerging Infectious Diseases, you called him a “Renaissance Man;” I like that. Tell us about that and give us some insight into Dr. Winn as a person.

[David Walker] Well, Wash a very intelligent man, fair minded. An example of that is he and I are on opposite ends of the country and opposite ends of the political spectrum and both of us reversed in our locations, me being in Texas, which is very conservative, and him being in Vermont, which is very liberal, did not match his ideas. But you can engage in a discussion with him and not worry that you would end up in an argument that was unfair. He'd give you his ideas, and often his ideas were worth considering because he was so intelligent. He was also a very witty person. He would have some insight into the irony of a situation or a contradiction or just something absurdly funny about anything. It was a kind humor, not a humor that was biting or scathing, but one that would just put a smile on your lips. He was forever sending me hilarious things about Texas that he would come across.

Wash also had a tremendous fund of knowledge and he applied this in clinical microbiology every day, I know. He was a very skilled, critical thinker. I know this personally from things that we wrote together. One of our first interactions began after he had left the branch at the CDC that I came to take a position in less than a year after he left. We had a shared, common mentor there who made a huge difference in our personal development and career development. Dr. Fred Murphy who, at one point, was the director of the National Center for Infectious Diseases, but at that time was down at the lowest administrative level of a branch chief, and Wash and I were assigned to him to write and present a paper on the pathology of Lassa fever at a meeting that was held at CDC. And it was just a scholarly thing to see him, how he could put these ideas together. I mean, the two of us together, I think, were a good team, but it was a team that was very strengthened by Wash's ability of critical thinking.

[Mike Miller] I remember Dr. Murphy also, and this is interesting. Tell us a little more about the road Wash took in his career and how he ended up as such an influential pathologist that specialized in clinical microbiology?

[David Walker] You know, it's not a straight line. Wash went to undergraduate school at Yale and studied English there. I think that's one reason he could express himself. He came back home to medical school in Virginia, and then went off and did an internship in internal medicine, which was a wonderful thing to become a laboratory-oriented scientist but be firmly grounded in your knowledge of the patient's issues and the physician's issues that are taking care of the patients. He then went on to do a residency in pathology at one of the premier places - United States Washington University at St. Louis. And then, back in the Vietnam era, some of us ended up in the public health service and were lucky enough to go to the CDC. And there, Wash started the arbovirus reference unit, and then after he worked there at least a year, he moved over to work with Fred Murphy in the viral pathology branch, which did a lot of electron microscopy and study of viral diseases, experimentally. Dr. Murphy is a member of the Institute of Medicine and has gone on to become a very famous man; he was also the dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California in Davis which is obviously one of the top places. After that, Wash went to the University of Virginia where he was on the faculty for four years and the clinical microbiology lab. Then he went to the University of Vermont where he was the director of clinical microbiology laboratory for the university for 34 years.

When he was there, he was really positioned to take advantage of one of those terrible things that comes along that pathologists and physicians do. That was an outbreak of Legionnaire's Disease which was eventually traced to a cooling tower there, nearby the medical facility. But there were a lot of cases, and Wash played a big role in defining the pathology of what Legionnaire's Disease really was. And then he got interested in research and he got an NIH grant and studied Legionnaire's Disease. His contributions, both in diagnosis and pathology, pathogenesis, and immunity, comprised 29 peer-reviewed publications. And then he decided that his real love, what he wanted to make an impact on, was clinical microbiology and he decided himself, rather than continuing to apply for NIH funding to go into clinical microbiology. I know that his impact there, at Vermont, was tremendous. Two people that he trained, I know well, that went on from there to do clinical microbiology fellowships. One of them did it here with me, Rocco LaSala, and they're just (as) passionate about the field as he was and (they have) great memories of him, and give examples of things he did.

One example was, in an era when he decided that he wanted to use real time PCR to improve diagnostics and clinical microbiology, and there was no real time PCR being done for clinical purposes in the institution. And he, within five years, had a full menu of home-grown and FDA-approved diagnostic tests.

He was a man who was very cost conscious, being a very conservative republican. He would not have spent a penny on something that wasn't justified. Yet, it would not hold back progress. He was able to do that and justify it. He wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been something that was needed by the patients and he could provide the service and it made sense.

At that point he went off, actually, and got an MBA. I think today, I know a lot of people who get MBAs by going to weekend courses and online, but Wash went the full MBA course at University of Vermont. I know that that really had an underpinning of wanting to do things effectively within his profession.

Some of the things that he has done, I know, in clinical microbiology, of course, he made a real mark with his contributions to Koneman's textbook. Elmer Koneman started a textbook in clinical microbiology; it was called an atlas, but it really had all of the methods and ideas in it that you would need to know. Wash contributed to that as an author of part of it, and then, beginning in the third edition, but by the sixth edition he was the chief editor and Elmer Koneman says that that was really the pinnacle of the book until that time.

[Mike Miller] He really did have a lot of contributions in science, but he was such an interesting person. Do you recall some of the outside hobbies and interests that he really had that made him such a fascinating person?

[David Walker] He was a person who would actually just undertake something because it took his fancy. He could play the banjo, and he did it well. He could play a fiddle, and he could do that well. He decided that he wanted to learn German, and he studied German and became fluent in German. He got interested in Egyptian hieroglyphics, and he mastered Egyptian hieroglyphics just for the fun of it. He had hobbies that he used his hands with; growing plants was one of them. He had a collection of Bonsai trees, they were really extensive at his house, and he grew ancient varieties of roses. He had a lot of things he would do.

Some of my fondest memories were sharing rooms with him at meetings of pathology societies, tropical medicine, or infectious diseases. And so we would end up having great conversations and they could go anywhere. But even, as much fun as the conversations, we'd be choosing a place to go eat together. I remember one particular meeting in Boston which must have lasted for five days or something; it was one of the longer meetings that I think I have gone through and enjoyed the whole thing, and we went to some obscure ethnic restaurant in Boston every night. We'd figure out what to eat from the menu and get it right. With Wash's knowledge of food and selecting a good wine, Wash was a master of understanding what was going to be fine and what was going to be good, and it didn't necessarily depend upon the price. We could go to someplace that really wasn't that cost very much and it would be fantastic.

[Mike Miller] The interesting thing about Wash was, in fact, his ability to hold conversations that would just draw you in at all times, whether it was scientific or whether it was just his outside interests. You know, with this in mind, one last question, I suppose. Is there any specific lesson that we might take from his career as an encouragement to young microbiologists entering this profession?

[David Walker] Well probably to more people than that, even. He would tell us all to enjoy life. He was a person who was very productive. Enjoying food, music — he was a passionate lover of opera — wine, in moderation, conversations full of ideas, irony, and wit. I think another lesson beside enjoy life would be to maintain a sense of humor. I think his ability to see wit and to bring a smile to one's face on every occasion that you would meet him, you would not pass without

having a smile across your visage is important. And then the other thing would be to undertake something new when you get the hankering to do so. Don't be afraid to just try to get through the things that you've bitten off to do, but to think of doing something different. Probably the last one is don't be afraid of being brutally honest. He would tell you what he thought, but he did it right. He did it with a smile and an attitude of supportiveness. I think that those things apply to life in general, but they certainly apply to developing a career in clinical microbiology.

[Mike Miller] Well, your article was such a fitting tribute to him, and it's so refreshing to find, in one professional, the highest achievements in his chosen career, but also to exhibit wisdom and humor and insight, honesty, and kindness. All of us who have the honor to know him would agree that he definitely made a difference in our science and in our relationships.

[David Walker] I agree. He is missed; he always will be missed.

[Mike Miller] Thanks, David. I've been talking with Dr. David Walker about his tribute to Dr. Washington Winn, Jr. that appeared in the December 2011 issue of CDC's journal, Emerging Infectious Diseases. You can see the entire article online at www.cdc.gov/eid.

If you'd like to comment on this podcast, send an email to eideditor@cdc.gov. That's e-i-d-editor – all one word – at c-d-c-dot-gov.

I'm Dr. Mike Miller, for Emerging Infectious Diseases.

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