DANA-FARBER
CANCER INSTITUTE

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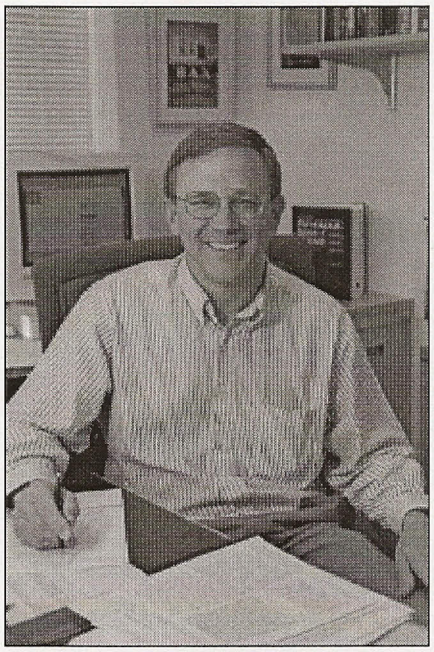
# Stanley J. Korsmeyer, MD, renowned cancer biologist, mentor, and colleague passes away at 54


Stanley Korsmeyer, MD

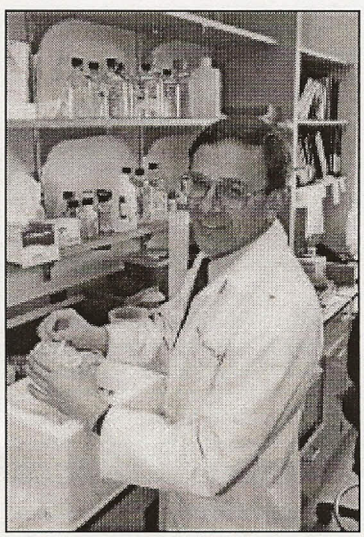
Stanley J. Korsmeyer, MD, a scientific leader at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute whose landmark discoveries about why cancer cells survive opened a promising new avenue for cancer treatment, died on March 31. A non-smoker, he died of lung cancer at 54.

Throughout a stellar career Dr. Korsmeyer was much-honored and regarded affectionately by colleagues and junior scientists throughout the cancer research community. He was a powerful and focused scientific visionary with an iron core of determination, tempered by a sunny, upbeat disposition. As a mentor, he guided the early careers of many postdoctoral fellows, graduate students and technicians.

Nick Powley, a former student in the Korsmeyer Lab, summarized the mentoring he enjoyed there with these observations: "He led with succinct and respectful questions that helped others to arrive at their own solutions with a sense of accomplishment only attainable through discovery and personal achievement. He was the best role model."

"Stan Korsmeyer was one of the world's great scientists and one of its greatest people," said Edward J. Benz, Jr., MD, Dana-Farber's president. "He was admired and loved for who he was even more than for what he accomplished. Even in the face of his illness, he was determined to take care of and support his family and those who depended on him in his lab. We will all miss him profoundly."

Dr. Korsmeyer burst on the scientific scene in the late 1980s, demonstrating that a particular form of blood cancer arose because a genetic flaw allowed the cells to survive the body's normal process for getting rid of them – "programmed" cell death, or apoptosis. The abnormal gene that blocked apoptosis, Bcl-2, thus became the first of a new class of cancer-causing "oncogenes" and Dr. Korsmeyer was credited with spearheading the study of apoptosis in cancer causation. "The recognition of apoptosis' primary role in cancer was a major insight that profoundly affected how we thought about cell death and survival," said Douglas Green, of the University of California in San Diego, a leading scientist in the field.



For his trailblazing research, Dr. Korsmeyer was elected to the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and has received many noteworthy honors, including the Bristol-Meyers Squibb Award for Distinguished Achievement in Cancer Research, the General Motors Mott Award, the first annual Wiley Foundation Prize in Biomedical Science, the Pezcoller Foundation-AACR International Award, and the Harvard Mentoring Award.

For 19 years Dr. Korsmeyer was a well-known investigator for the prestigious Howard Hughes Medical Institute, the largest private funder of biomedical research and science education in the nation. HHMI supports about 300 highly selected scientists at their home institutions.

"He was everybody's hero — as a scientist and as a human being," said eminent scientist and close friend, Nobel laureate Robert Horvitz of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "His contributions were truly major and pioneering, and they revolutionized the field," Horvitz added.

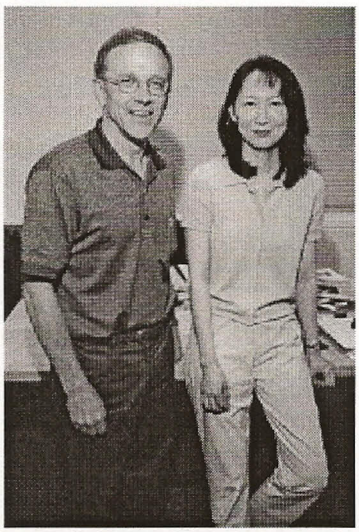
Dr. Korsmeyer joined Dana-Farber in 1998, recruited from Washington University in St. Louis where he was director of the Division of Molecular Oncology and Professor of Medicine. David Nathan, MD, president of Dana-Farber at the time, sought him not only

for his scientific brilliance, but for a rarer and perhaps even more valuable asset. "I recruited him because I wanted him in the Dana-Farber family — his character would shine on us and make everyone a better team player," Nathan said. "Within a few months of his coming, I felt a surge of morale in the faculty. He was a team player and an enhancer of other people's productivity and ability to work together."


Stanley Korsmeyer, MD

At Dana-Farber, Dr. Korsmeyer headed the Program in Molecular Oncology within the Department of Cancer Immunology and AIDS. He was the Sidney Farber Professor of Pathology and Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. As the Chair of the Executive Committee on Research, Dr. Korsmeyer was a scientific visionary and driving force, helping to shape the Institute's new strategic plan for attacking cancer that emphasizes collaboration among researchers within and outside of Dana-Farber, while employing the most advanced tools for discovering new cancer drug candidates. At the time of Dr. Korsmeyer's death, he and his Dana-Farber colleagues had begun applying what they had learned over the years, manipulating apoptosis molecules to force cancer cells to self-destruct. They have been pressing the search for drugs that could counteract the abnormal survival signals from Bcl-2 that make cancer so hard to treat.

Loren Walensky, MD, PhD, who is working on such a project, said that he was awed by Dr. Korsmeyer's endurance and persistence through the course of his disease. "With his diagnosis, he had been dealt a very daunting outlook, yet he came to work every day he could." Said Walensky, "If he had to come in a wheelchair, he did. If he was looking or feeling unwell because of the treatment, he still came to work. He was very tough scientifically, and that toughness applied to how he fought his disease."


Korsmeyer with Emily Cheng, MD, PhD

Dr. Korsmeyer was born in 1950 in Beardstown, Ill., the son of a livestock farmer. With these roots, he became the youngest person ever (at age 14) to show the Grand Champion pair of Hampshire Hogs at the Illinois State Fair, receiving the Governor's Trophy as his first piece of "hardware." These same roots led to an interest in veterinary medicine, but, following the advice of a mentoring veterinarian, he switched to pre-med.

To gain his MD from the University of Illinois, Chicago, he was mentored by Dr. Paul Heller and persuaded to pursue hematology. He completed an internship and residency at the University of California Hospitals in San Francisco. Dr. Korsmeyer served a research fellowship at the National Cancer Institute from 1979 to 1982. There, he spent time in the laboratory of noted cancer researchers Philip Leder, MD, and Tom Waldman, MD, learning the then-new techniques of recombinant DNA to pursue his interest in blood cancers. "You could recognize about Stan, even as a starting scientist, that he had astonishing intellect, curiosity, and ability to thoroughly understand a subject, integrate the knowledge, and act upon it," said Leder, who now heads the Department of Genetics at Harvard Medical School. "And he was a terrific guy."

Not only was Dr. Korsmeyer a renowned scientist, but a devoted and loving father to his sons, Jason and Evan. No medical accolade surpassed Dr. Korsmeyer's pride as a father. Susan, his wife of 25 years, provided constant and steadfast commitment to their sons and to Dr. Korsmeyer's academic career.

Benz, who was personally close to Dr. Korsmeyer, said, "For all of his scientific renown, Stan Korsmeyer will be

remembered more for his warmth and collegiality and his passion for making the Institute a better place to conquer cancer."

Dr. Korsmeyer is survived by his beloved family, including his wife, Susan J. (Reynard) Korsmeyer; sons Jason Louis and Evan John Korsmeyer; parents Willard and Carnell Korsmeyer; sisters Lynn (husband, Michael) Hollahan, Janet Korsmeyer, and Karen (husband, Joseph) Randolla; grandfather, Carl Jolly; three nephews, five nieces, as well as many aunts, uncles and cousins.

**Editor's Note:** A 150 dpi jpeg color image of Dr. Korsmeyer is available for download: http://www.dana-farber.org/images/abo/news/press/korsmeyer.jpg
(Credit: Photo by Steve Gilbert)