

Obituary

Peter E Stokes (1926–2005)

Neuropsychopharmacology (2005) 30, 1405–1406. doi:10.1038/sj.npp.1300741



Peter Stokes, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, died on January 22 at the age of 78 years. He was internationally known for his investigation of neuroendocrine function in depression and for his evaluation and implementation of lithium treatment for bipolar disease.

Stokes was unusual among Biological Psychiatrists because he came to Psychiatry after 15 years of training in and practice of Medicine, Endocrinology, and Metabolism at the New York Hospital after graduation from Cornell University Medical College in 1952. He became interested in Psychiatry through his observations of psychic changes in patients with Cushing's Disease. In 1966, he moved to the Department of Psychiatry in the Payne Whitney Clinic and quickly established a program of neuroendocrine research in patients with affective disorders while completing his training in Psychiatry. In 1970, he was made Chief of the Psychobiology Research Unit and Laboratory. Over the next 25 years, Stokes made this Unit the focus of biological research and training in the Department.

His research program had three components—adrenocortical function in depression, lithium treatment in bipolar

disease, and the psychological, endocrine, and hematologic effects of alcohol. All of this research was characterized by methodological rigor, careful design, and critical interpretation of results. Stokes was one of the first investigators to describe a significant abnormality in the Hypothalamic-Anterior Pituitary-Adrenocortical system (HPAC) in depressed patients. His first report of this appeared in an abstract in 1970; his last paper on it was published in 1994. His leadership in this area was recognized as early as 1975 when he was selected to be a charter member of the NIMH Collaborative Depression Study and was responsible for data collection and analysis of the HPAC aspects of the 10-year multicenter investigation. He was also a member of the NIMH Psychopathology and Clinical Biology Research Review Committee from 1982–1985, serving as Chairman in 1985.

His work on lithium was equally innovative and important. In 1971, he and his colleagues published an influential paper in *Lancet* on the efficacy of lithium for acute treatment of manic depressive illness. This was followed up by intensive study of lithium in patients, rodents, and erythrocytes for the next 13 years.

In addition to his own research program, Stokes was an energetic, generous, and helpful collaborator with a variety of people inside and outside the Department. Topics ranged from melatonin and lymphocyte beta-receptor sensitivity in depression, the metabolic effects of ECT, dopamine in anorexia nervosa, and the neuroendocrine responses of rhesus monkeys to appetitive and aversive stimuli.

He was a superb mentor of residents and junior faculty who were interested in clinical research. He led by example and his example was compelling. He combined the highest scholarly values, experimental rigor, clinical concern, and deep respect for the privilege and responsibilities of human research. His example lives on in the Department in the research programs of two of his most successful trainees, George Alexopoulos and James Kocsis.

Stokes was not an easy man for administrators. He resented any of their intrusions into his scientific, intellectual, or psychological spaces. He was a master of passive resistance. If that failed, he was capable of ferocious confrontations. One of us (GPS) once asked him if he were afraid of administrative retribution for his formidable defense of his turf. His eyes sparkled and a slight grin appeared. Then, in a very characteristic gesture, he raised his right hand to the corner of his glasses and readjusted the frame slightly so that his eyes seemed to grow bigger. A steely glint replaced the sparkle and he said, 'No, I'm not afraid of what might happen as a result of being difficult to deal with. You see I flew a fighter plane for the Navy in World War II and I had to learn how to land on the deck of an aircraft carrier in heavy seas and all kinds of weather. That was something to be scared about. After that, academic skirmishes seemed like small stuff.'

When Stokes graduated from medical school, he was the recipient of the coveted Good Physician Award given to the

graduating medical student who, in the opinion of his or her peers, has the mental, moral, and personal characteristics of a Good Physician. This was prophetic. His patients revered him. Although his waiting room always ran late, all of his patients said that he was worth waiting for. And so he was. They, his colleagues, and students will miss him.

He is survived by his wife Marjorie, three children, and one sister. Memorial contributions can be made to

the Weill-Cornell Medical College (1300 York Avenue, New York, NY 10021, USA) or the National Kidney Foundation.

James H Kocsis and Gerard P Smith
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