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In Memoriam

John E. Overall

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Professor Emeritus of Psychology, John E Overall passed away on 27 March 2016 at the age of 86. Throughout his eminent career, Dr Overall served as a consultant or advisory board member at the ACNP, the CINP, the ECDEU, the VA, the FDA, the NIMH, and the WHO. He is best known for his leading role in the development of the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS) with Donald R. Gorham, which has made a lasting impact on clinical research.

Dr Overall was born in Gonzales, Texas in 1929, the son of an attorney and a schoolteacher, spending most of his childhood in San Antonio. Following his military service at Lackland Air Force base from 1952 to 1954, Overall completed his undergraduate degree in Psychology at Trinity University in San Antonio. He earned his Master's Degree (1956) and his PhD (1958) in Experimental Psychology at the University of Texas in Austin, by which time he had already co-authored several papers and engaged in significant research.

While at UT Austin, Dr Overall's initial interest in statistical methodology was aroused by the distinguished visiting Professor Dr Lyle V Jones. Following his graduate work, Overall received a NSF Postdoctoral Fellowship, sponsored by Dr Jones, for research at the Psychometric Laboratory of the University of North Carolina. Through UNC's Department of Statistics, a member of the Research Triangle Statistical Institute, Dr Overall came in contact with some of the most preeminent scholars in the field of multivariate analysis.

Following his postdoctoral year, Overall was appointed Chief of Criterion Development at the Veterans Administration Central Neuropsychiatric Research Laboratory at Perry Point, Maryland. While there, he applied his recently acquired multivariate statistical analysis methodology to huge volumes of data from existing VA collaborative studies.

During his time at the VA (1959–1961), Dr Overall forged important professional relationships with key figures in clinical psychopharmacological research, the most important being Dr Leo Hollister. He enjoyed a 20-year-long collaboration with Hollister, which was instrumental in his election to Fellow of ACNP and CINP, leading to many collaborative studies with important leaders in European Psychiatry. While at Perry Point, he also came to know Dr James Klett, with whom he would later co-author the book "Applied Multivariate Analysis" (1972).

After 2 years at Perry Point, Dr Overall was offered the position of Associate Professor of Psychology at Kansas State University, where he spent his next 2 years (1962–1963). This appointment included institutional support in his application for an NIMH Research Career Development Award, which he received shortly after his arrival. While at KSU, Overall authored a number of clinical research papers in psychopharmacology and further developed his statistical studies.

Prior to making his final career move to the University of Texas Medical School in Houston as Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science, Dr Overall served 14 years (1964–1978) at the University of Texas, Galveston in the Department of Psychiatry.

Throughout every phase of his life, Dr Overall maintained a close connection to the elemental qualities of the natural world, whether working on a Gulf Coast shrimp boat in his youth, pheasant hunting while an academician in Kansas, or tending his livestock after retirement at his Needville, Texas ranch. The no-frills simplicity of nature also influenced Overall's research methodology.

During Dr Overall's last several years in academia, he published a series of programmatic studies aimed at improving the analysis of controlled clinical trials data and the subsequent interpretation and communication of those results. His guiding principle in this work was the rule of parsimony. At this time, complex procedures for modeling longitudinal data were assuming a more dominant position among statisticians. Although these models certainly have their advantages, Dr Overall became concerned about their widespread application to clinical trials data. He believed that the added complexity of these models were often not worth the cost in most controlled clinical trials. Across a series of studies, Dr Overall was able to clearly demonstrate that simpler alternatives performed as well as, and often better than, the more complex approaches. Moreover, the simpler approaches that he was advocating for were less prone to misspecification error, easier to understand, and easier to communicate to clinical trials researchers in comparison to the more complex modeling procedures.

John is survived by his wife Peggy, a teacher, his daughter Catherine, an attorney, and his sister Catherine Richards, as well as other extended family members.

KD Charalampous*[1]
[1]*University of Texas at Houston, Houston, TX, USA*
E-mail: kdxmd@hal-pc.org