American College of Neuropsychopharmacology

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IN MEMORIAM

In Memoriam Donald S. Robinson, MD

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Donald S Robinson MD, ACNP Fellow Emeritus, who passed away peacefully surrounded by family on September 16, 2022 at the age of 94 will be remembered not only for his very special personal characteristics and multiple contributions to the field of psychopharmacology as well as the ACNP, but also for his truly seminal role as one of the founding fathers of the emerging field of psychopharmacology. During his fellowship at the NIH Heart, Lung and Blood Institute in the late 60's he became interested in clinical pharmacology and embarked on a long and productive research career in academia and industry. His early interest in the emerging science of biogenic amines focused initially on a class of drugs, the monamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), which at that time had just been serendipitously identified as having antidepressant activity. However, Don did not approach the study of MAOIs from the perspective of a psychiatrist but rather as a clinical pharmacologist steeped in training in internal medicine and desiring to understand how this particular class of agents actually worked. His own research, together with the work of others, provided a template for how to study and characterize pharmacokinetic/pharmacodynamic (PK/PD) relationships that remain at the core of contemporary clinical psychopharmacology and drug development. It is not an exaggeration to consider Don as one of the true fathers of the field of psychopharmacology that is central to the mission of the ACNP: bridging basic mechanistic studies of drug action to fully optimize the use of existing drugs as well as to forge a path to even better ones. In pursuit of these goals, he became a role model for many of us moving from academic careers to leadership positions in industry in order to discover and develop new medicines to treat a variety of neuropsychiatric disorders.

As an academic clinical pharmacologist in the late 60's and pharmacology department chair in the early 70's, Don led a series of elegant preclinical and clinical studies to characterize the PK/PD relationships of MAOIs (especially phenelzine) using platelets (a rich source of serotonin) as a proxy for studying the effects of MAOIs on biogenic amine metabolism in the brain. He early on embraced the use of pharmacogenomics and carried out some of the earliest studies on the metabolism of tricyclic antidepressants which is now well recognized to have a genetic basis due to polymorphisms in the P450 drug metabolizing enzymes.

In 1984, Don transitioned from academia to industry to become head of CNS research at Bristol-Myers Squibb motivated by a desire to apply his scientific and medical expertise to the development of new and better CNS drugs. During his time in industry, Don managed a large portfolio of new investigational agents downplaying, with his customary modesty, his seminal role in developing several important FDA approved drugs including butorphanol (Stadol), buspirone (Buspar), and nefazodone (Serzone). He was also an early champion of exploring the potential of emerging molecular targets identified by the field of molecular biology and pharmacology as it exploded in the 1980's; he was especially interested in the family of serotonin receptors and transporters which resulted in characterizing buspirone as a selective 5HT1a receptor agonist. Don also designed the clinical trials that led to the approval and launch of EMSAM (selegeline transdermal system) a MAO-B inhibitor as well as Viibryd (vilazodone) a SSRI/5HT1A partial agonist.

Don continued to make important contributions to our field and the ACNP after retiring from industry in 1993, serving on multiple boards, contributing to or editing textbooks on psychotropic drugs, advising the FDA and participating in panel presentations at scientific meetings. He was a trusted mentor and advisor to many of us in the field of clinical psychopharmacology. On a personal level, there was no one in the field who was more of a true gentleman and scholar. He was always curious and open to new ideas, listened more than opining and was generous to a fault in helping others advance the field of psychopharmacology and develop their own independent careers. Don will be missed and remembered not only for his many contributions to our field but also as a model physician-scientist.

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