

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Cancer and Society

Wynder, Ernst

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Cancer and Society

Chapter Title: "Wynder, Ernst"

Pub. Date: 2015

Access Date: November 10, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781483345734

Online ISBN: 9781483345758

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483345758.n644>

Print pages: 1327-1329

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483345758.n644>

Ernst Wynder was a pioneer cancer researcher with notable achievements in tobacco and nutrition epidemiology that began in medical school, when he co-authored a seminal paper on smoking and lung cancer. He had a strong interest in prevention-oriented health education, especially for schoolchildren. Wynder began his career in an era when there was little scientific basis for prevention of chronic diseases like cancer and heart disease, and he played a significant role in developing the principles and practice of cancer control that still guide the field today. He was a tireless advocate of policies that integrated the roles of government, medical institutions, and individuals in using studies of disease causes to develop prevention and control strategies. He was an influential adviser on cancer policy to many U.S. government and international organizations, and he was founder and editor-in-chief of a major medical journal, *Preventive Medicine*, one of the first academic journals in the field. He died of thyroid cancer in 1999.

Early Years

Born in Herford, Germany, he immigrated with his family to the United States in 1938 to escape Nazi persecution. He received a B.A. from New York University (1943), served as a U.S. Army Intelligence officer in World War II, and received an M.D. at Washington University in St. Louis (1950). In 1948, while still a medical student, he began collecting case histories of lung cancer victims. He eventually convinced Dr. Evarts Graham, a prominent surgeon at Washington University who was also a smoker and strongly skeptical, to allow him to interview [p. 1327 ↓] patients there and, importantly, to support a successful application for funding from the American Cancer Society. Their data became the basis for a landmark paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* linking lung cancer to cigarette smoking that was noteworthy for unusually rigorous attention to methodological detail, such as pathological confirmation of diagnoses, distinguishing different lung cancer types, and handling potential biases.

Although cancer had been caused experimentally in animals using chemicals found in tobacco smoke as early as 1918, by the 1950s lifestyle and environmental causes of cancer were still poorly understood, and the pervasiveness of smoking, along with aggressive support of medical research by the tobacco industry, left many researchers

unconvinced that the statistical associations represented disease causation. Wynder believed that these questions could not be answered by epidemiology alone, but required a coordinated approach involving experimental biology and chemistry, and, above all public education. He continued studies of cancer patients beginning in 1951, as a medical resident at Memorial Hospital and researcher at the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research, where he and chemist Dietrich Hoffmann (1924– 2011) began a collaboration on experimental studies on tobacco chemistry and air pollution that would become one of the most enduring partnerships in cancer research.

More than 20 of their studies were cited in the cancer chapter of the first “Surgeon-General’s Report on Smoking and Health” (1964). At Memorial, Wynder carried out definitive studies of cancers of the mouth, larynx, breast, and other sites. However, his unrelenting focus on harmful effects of tobacco at an institution that was receiving substantial support from tobacco company Philip Morris made him the target of threats to censor or suppress his studies, thwarted only by the intercession of board member and Nobel laureate Peyton Rous. Although Wynder maintained an affiliation at Memorial Sloan-Kettering until his death (the two institutions merged in 1960), he eventually decided to strike out on his own.

American Health Foundation

In 1969, Wynder founded the American Health Foundation (AHF), serving as its president and medical director for almost 30 years. The foundation’s epidemiology and health behavior divisions were headquartered in the Ford Foundation building in Manhattan, near Memorial Sloan-Kettering and other hospitals where epidemiological studies could be done. Its basic science divisions were housed in a specially designed building in Valhalla, New York, also known as the Naylor Dana Institute after the Eleanor Naylor Dana Foundation, which, with the National Cancer Institute (NCI), provided major construction support. The AHF, supported largely by competitive grants from the NCI, the American Cancer Society, and other agencies, was built on extensive multidisciplinary research programs in epidemiology, tobacco and chemical carcinogenesis, nutrition, pathology, and health behavior and promotion, and was the only NCI-designated cancer center devoted exclusively to prevention. At its peak,

it employed over 200 scientists and technicians, with sophisticated state-of-the-art instrumentation and animal research facilities and a scientific library.

In 1972, Wynder recruited John Weisburger (1921–2014), then director of the NCI's bioassay program, to be vice president and director of research. Hoffmann served as associate director and chief of the Division of Environmental Carcinogenesis, where he made numerous contributions including identification (along with Dr. Stephen Hecht) of an important class of carcinogens— nitrosamines—in tobacco smoke. Other major epidemiological initiatives included studies of the impact of dietary change on both breast and prostate cancer, with special emphasis on the possible impact of dietary fat on survival from both cancers.

Concerned about the fragmented state of school health education, Wynder directed substantial foundation efforts toward developing, implementing, and evaluating K–12 curricula and materials in a program called “Know Your Body” (KYB) in at least eight countries. A central prop of KYB was a health passport for each child that was intended to track key health measurements. This concept was eventually adopted by many organizations as a useful record-keeping device.

Preventive Medicine

In 1972, Wynder founded *Preventive Medicine*, the first academic journal devoted to the topic, and served as its editor-in-chief for 25 years during [p. 1328 ↓] which he oversaw publication of hundreds of influential articles. In his opening editorial, he quoted a Greek adage: “It is the function of medicine to help people to die young as late as possible,” an epigram that he often repeated in writings and speeches.

Awards and Publications

Wynder received numerous awards, including the U.S. Surgeon General's Medal (1989), the American Cancer Society Medal of Honor for Clinical Research (1989), and the Robert Koch Gold Medal (1990). He published more than 800 papers plus a highly

influential book, *Tobacco and Tobacco Smoke* (Academic Press, 1967), which have been cited in over 30,000 subsequent scientific publications.

Personal

Wynder was a noted international traveler who frequented elite social circles, often with research funding in mind. The American Health Foundation Board of Directors at times included representatives of Norton Simon, Inc., Merrill Lynch, Perrier, the Miami Dolphins, and various entertainment industry figures. He was once linked romantically with actress Kim Novak. He eventually married Sandra Miller, his companion of 25 years.

See Also: [Tobacco in History](#); [Tobacco Smoking](#); [Tobacco-Related Exposures](#).

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483345758.n644>

Further Readings

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