



Obituary

In Memoriam: Leon Gordis, MD, DrPH

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Initially submitted October 12, 2015; accepted for publication October 13, 2015.

Dr. Leon Gordis, one of the most revered professors of public health, died on September 7, 2015, in New York, New York. He was born in New York on July 19, 1934, and was raised in Queens by his father, Robert Gordis, a conservative rabbi and scholar at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and his mother Fannie Gordis, a homemaker. He received his bachelor of arts degree in 1954 from Columbia University and simultaneously received a bachelor of Hebrew literature degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He received his doctor of medicine degree in 1958 from the State University of New York, Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York, and then completed an internship and residency in pediatrics (1958–1961) at the Jewish Hospital in Brooklyn. Dr. Gordis then moved to Baltimore, where he was a fellow in pediatrics (1962–1966) at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and a research fellow in pediatrics (1963–1965) at Sinai Hospital of Baltimore. Simultaneously, from 1961 to 1965, he was a field officer in the Heart Disease Control Program, Division of Chronic Diseases of the US Public Health Service and in the Heart Disease Control Office, Division of Crippled Children of the Maryland State Department of Health (1961–1963).

In 1966, upon completion of his medical training, Dr. Gordis joined the faculty of the Department of Pediatrics in the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine as an instructor. He also served first as the associate director of the Pediatric Family Clinic in 1966 and then as the director of the Adolescent Center at Sinai Hospital of Baltimore (1967–1969), where he was also an associate attending physician in pediatrics. He was awarded a masters of public health degree from the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health in 1966 and a doctor of public health degree in chronic disease epidemiology in 1968 under the direction of Professor Abraham Lilienfeld. Dr. Gordis was appointed an assistant professor of pediatrics in 1968, associate professor of epidemiology in the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health in 1971 (with a joint appointment in pediatrics), and then professor and chair of epidemiology in 1975.

Dr. Gordis was the fifth chair of the Department of Epidemiology, serving from 1975 (after Abraham Lilienfeld step-



ped down) until 1993. During this period, the department grew exponentially, adding groundbreaking education and research in the emerging field of genetic epidemiology, the resurgence of infectious diseases associated with human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, and overall growth associated with the increasing budgets of the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Gordis was a prolific author and contributor to many fields of epidemiology and health care. He is particularly well known in his role as director of the course “Principles of Epidemiology” at the School of Hygiene and Public Health. From this course came the widely heralded textbook *Epidemiology* (1), which was first published by W.B. Saunders (now Elsevier) in 1996; in 2014, the fifth edition was released (2). This text is perhaps the most widely used book for teaching introductory epidemiology in schools and programs in public health worldwide. Its clarity, exposition of basic principles guided by examples from the medical and public health literature, and precise use of terminology, all of which is carefully defined and used throughout, make this a text from which even the most naive student can truly benefit. Dr. Gordis’ teaching ability was attested to by his constant nomination for and winning of the “Golden Apple

Award for Excellence in Teaching,” which was awarded by the students in the School. Dr. Gordis was selected as the recipient of the “Golden Apple” in 1975, his first year teaching “Principles of Epidemiology,” as well as in 1981, 1988, 1992, 2000, and 2007—virtually every year that he was eligible. By all measures, he was among the all-time favorite instructors in our School. In the School of Medicine at Johns Hopkins, Dr. Gordis was the course director for “Clinical Epidemiology,” which he taught from 1980 to 1997 and which was a requirement for all medical students. In 1989, he was honored for this course by being given the “Professor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching in the Preclinical Sciences.” Dr. Gordis was renowned for his commitment to and excellence in teaching, which was done in large part with humor and an unending trove of jokes for any epidemiologic example he was trying to explain.

The depth and breadth of his bibliography (Web Appendix, available at <http://aje.oxfordjournals.org>) demonstrates his widespread application of epidemiologic methods to a number of medical issues. He was a widely published and thoughtful author, commencing with a volume that he wrote with his pediatrics mentor, Professor Milton Markowitz, entitled *Rheumatic Fever, Second Edition* in 1972 (3). This volume included research he conducted for his doctor of public health dissertation. The following year, he published *Epidemiology of Chronic Lung Diseases in Children* (4). Fifteen years later, he published *Epidemiology and Health Risk Assessment* (5).

Dr. Gordis edited *Epidemiologic Reviews* (a sister publication to the *American Journal of Epidemiology*) beginning with volume 3 in 1981 with Neal Nathanson, through volume 16 in 1994. This annual volume of reviews is the most highly cited journal in the field of public health.

Early articles by Dr. Gordis focused on basic science topics (e.g., lysosomes), with later articles on organizational factors in outpatient pediatric clinics, rheumatic fever, adolescent pregnancy, compliance in health care, pediatric brain tumors, and pancreatic cancer, among other topics. By the late 1980s, he had contributed articles on future challenges to epidemiology, bringing epidemiology to bear on hazardous waste disposal, and evaluating the evidence for prevention effectiveness. As a member of the US Preventive Services Task Force from 2002 to 2007, his publication topics included promulgating recommendations on screening for depression in adults and children, aspirin for the prevention of cardiovascular disease, screening for skin cancer, hearing loss for newborns, and type 2 and gestational diabetes mellitus in adults, among others. Further, he contributed some 25 book chapters in edited volumes on various epidemiologic topics. Clearly, he made many important contributions to the science of public health and the application of epidemiologic topics to health issues of the day.

Dr. Gordis chaired the National Institutes of Health Consensus Development Conference held at the National Institutes of Health campus in Bethesda, Maryland, on January 21–23, 1997, after which they released the statement “Breast Cancer Screening for Women Ages 40–49” (6). As a member of the Institute of Medicine Committee on Technologies for the Early Detection of Breast Cancer, he published *Mammography and Beyond: Developing Technologies for the Best Detection of Breast Cancer* (7). These reports generated significant negative response from the health care community because the findings suggested that routine screening mammography for

women in this age group was not supported by data and that women and their providers should weigh the risks and benefits of screening. He did not shy from controversy!

When Dr. Gordis stepped down as chair of the Department of Epidemiology in 1993, he immediately started another career as the associate dean for admissions and academic affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. From 1993 to 2005, he was the course director and designer of “Physician and Society,” a 4-year course required for all medical students. He was also director of the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program at Johns Hopkins from 1993 to 2006.

Dr. Gordis was a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and an elected member of the American Pediatric Society, the Society for Pediatric Research, the American Epidemiological Society, the Society for Epidemiologic Research, and the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (1986). He was an elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and served as president of both the Society for Epidemiologic Research (1979–1980) and the American Epidemiological Society (1983–1984). He served the epidemiologic community through participation on national boards and editorial boards and service on National Institutes of Health study sections and other activities.

Dr. Gordis retired from the faculty effective February 2, 2009, and was appointed professor emeritus by the Board of Trustees at that time. He and his wife, Hadassah Gordis, moved to Israel shortly thereafter, but he maintained contact with the Summer Institute of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, where he continued to teach.

At an event to commemorate his career held at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health on May 18, 2009, many of his close collaborators spoke, including former dean D.A. Henderson; Professor Paul Whelton, with whom he founded the Welch Center for Epidemiology, Prevention, and Clinical Research in 1990; Professor Lewis H. Kuller, a former member of the Department of Epidemiology faculty and now university professor of public health at the University of Pittsburgh; Professor Moyses Szklo, former student and now professor of the Department of Epidemiology and long-time editor-in-chief of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*; Professor Michel Ibrahim, dean emeritus of the University of North Carolina School of Public Health, professor of epidemiology at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and editor-in-chief of *Epidemiologic Reviews*; and Elie Gordis, his son, on behalf of the Gordis family, with closing comments from Dean Michael Klag, a student of Dr. Gordis and early member of the Welch Center.

Dr. Gordis had a long-term involvement in public health activities in Israel. He was a visiting professor of epidemiology at Ben Gurion University, Beer Sheva in 1980, 1984, and 1986, and visiting professor at Tel-Aviv University School of Medicine and School of Public Health from 2007 until his death. On June 1, 2015, the Schools of Public Health of Israel and the Israeli Public Health Physicians Association honored Dr. Gordis for his lifelong contributions to epidemiologic teaching and global public health. The theme of the joint annual conference was “Health Knows No Borders.” Daniel Cohen, the head of the scientific committee of the conference, paraphrased that Leon’s book *Epidemiology* and his teaching knew no borders.

Dr. Gordis was honored with a teaching fellowship program upon his retirement that supports graduate students in epidemiology engaged in teaching undergraduate students in the public health major at the Johns Hopkins Krieger School of Arts & Sciences. The Department of Epidemiology is establishing the Gordis Fellowship to support doctoral students in epidemiology who seek to hone their teaching skills to train future generations of epidemiologists. Dr. Gordis had a major impact on thousands of public health and medical students over his 50 years at Johns Hopkins. He will be sorely missed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Conflict of interest: none declared.

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