

Obituary

Mount Sinai School of Medicine



Melvin D Yahr

Initiated use of levodopa in Parkinson's disease; led the neurology department of Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA. Born Nov 18, 1917, in New York; died of lung cancer on Jan 1, 2004, in Scarsdale, NY; aged 86 years.

In the 1960s, Melvin Yahr, George Cotzias, and Fletcher McDowell, working independently, were among the first to use levodopa in patients with Parkinson's disease, following on the work of Arvid Carlsson. Carlsson went on to share the 2000 Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology for his discovery that dopamine was a neurotransmitter. "Yahr and Fletcher McDowell were neck and neck in friendly competition", James Toole, the past president of the World Federation of Neurology, told *The Lancet*. But Yahr published the first double-blind levodopa study in 1969, establishing the drug's effectiveness against Parkinson's disease. Millions of patients have since been prescribed the drug.

Yahr was born on New York's Lower East Side, and grew up in the Bronx and Brooklyn. He earned a bachelor's degree from New York University's Washington Square College in 1939, and a medical degree from the same university in 1943. He served in the Army Medical Corps from 1944 until 1947. From then until 1973, he was on the neurology faculty at Columbia University, New York.

He was an internationally recognised and outspoken expert on Parkinson's disease. In 2000, he organised a letter campaign criticising the Nobel Prize committee for not including Oleh Hornykiewicz in the 2000 award shared by Carlsson. In 1983, Yahr was contacted by Morris K Udall, a member of the US House of Representatives from Arizona who came in second to Jimmy Carter for the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination. Udall had recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease; he consulted Yahr and two other neurologists when he was considering running for the 1984 candidacy. Yahr told *The Washington Post* in 1983 that Udall could "as he is today, absolutely" run and function fully as president. However, Udall finally decided not to run.

Yahr published more than 300 scientific papers. In 1967, Yahr and Margaret Hoehn published, in *Neurology*, the five-stage rating scale

of Parkinson's that would eventually be known as the Hoehn-Yahr scale; it is still in use. "Their work established that the average age of onset of PD [Parkinson's disease] was in the 6th decade (ie, between ages 50–59 years), described a broad spectrum of rates of progression, established that PD was associated with an increased mortality rate, and concluded that there were no treatments that affected life expectancy", wrote G Frederick Wooten, Chair of the American Parkinson Disease Association's scientific advisory board, in 1997. "This paper has become the classical clinical description of PD in the pre-levodopa era."

Yahr was chairman of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine neurology department from 1973 to 1992. He was president of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and the American Neurological Association. "He was a key person with H Houston Merritt in making the New York Neurological Institute into the stellar institution that it became", said Toole, who is a professor of neurology at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine, NC, USA. "Their legacy is still evident today in terms of the outstanding work that's done up there. They set the bedrock for the organisation and buildings and layout."

Yahr helped to found the specialty of movement disorders, Toole said. He organised a worldwide extrapyramidal disorders group for the World Federation of Neurology. "He wasn't a chart doctor, he was a clinician. He was into making the diagnosis quickly and getting started on the treatment fast", said Toole. "There were no imaging studies, so you had to be a very skilled physician. These were 'sign men'. He was an extraordinarily good bedside clinician."

Yahr was a great mentor and teacher, Toole said, whose former students honoured him by endowing a symposium at the World Congress of Neurology. His wife of 44 years, Felice Turtz, died in 1992. He is survived by his sister, four daughters, and five grandchildren.

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