Obituary

Thomas Herald Rea, MD (1929–2016)

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of Dr. Thomas H. Rea. He passed peacefully on February 7 in the company of his family and loved ones.

A world renowned dermatologist and leprologist, Dr. Rea served as the Project Director for the Hansen’s Disease (HD) Program at the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California (LAC+USC) Medical Center in Los Angeles for 31 years before retiring from this role in 2012. Prior to the creation of the HD program at USC, Dr. Rea had already served as a national leader in Hansen’s Disease research and care, beginning in 1963 at Bellevue Hospital in New York.

For over 50 years, Dr. Rea has been a leading voice in Hansen’s Disease care. As a young faculty member in the Department of Dermatology at New York University (NYU) he developed an interest in HD, recognizing the direct influence of the immune system on the clinical presentation of the disease. With only corticosteroids and clofazimine available to combat erythema nodosum leprosum (ENL) in some of his patients, he recognized the dramatic efficacy of the controversial drug thalidomide in managing ENL and lobbied the federal FDA (Food and Drug Administration) for approval of its use. Dr. Rea’s was also passionate for years about understanding Lucio’s Phenomenon and diffuse lepromatous leprosy.

Dr. Rea completed his undergraduate studies at Oberlin College and his M.D. at the University of Michigan where he also did his internship and dermatology residency at the University Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He went on to his fellowship training in the Department of Dermatology at the New York University, School of Medicine. His interests in research stem from the surrounding vibrant immunology research community at NYU, including scientists like Dr. Rudolph Baer, studying mechanisms of contact dermatitis and Dr. H. Sherwood Lawrence doing early work on immunologic memory.

Dr. Rea served as Chief of the Division of Dermatology at USC between 1981 and 1996. During this time, Dr. Rea began studying the immunology of HD, investigating the role of antibodies and cell-mediated immune (CMI) responses. He sought additional training (1980-1981) in CMI with Dr. John Turk at the Royal College of Surgeons in London and, while there, took advantage of the presence of Dr. Dennis Ridley to learn the complex Ridley-Jopling histopathological classification scheme for HD. His interests in research have resulted in > 140 published, peer reviewed articles. Working closely with Dr. Robert Modlin, Dr. Rea helped to identify the key Th1 and Th2 cytokines at the site of disease in leprosy.
These studies were published in *Nature* and *Science*, becoming landmark papers in our understanding of the immune system.

In 2015, the leprosy clinic at LAC + USC Medical Center was renamed the Thomas H. Rea Hansen’s Disease Clinic at LAC + USC and it currently serves more patients than any of the other 12 National Hansen’s Disease Program ambulatory care clinics in the USA. Dr. Rea was the heart and soul of this clinic. He remained very active in direct patient care until his retirement. Always soft spoken, he approached each patient with sincerity. He was a fierce advocate for those who entrusted themselves to his care.

As a mentor, Dr. Rea always enjoyed teaching moments with a multi-generational field of clinicians, doctors, medical students, therapists, laboratory scientists and guests. His expertise was shared across a geographical area far larger than the LA clinic. From his early days in New York he promoted the need for HD awareness in the U.S. and internationally. To this end he assisted and consulted with numerous physicians- locally, nationally and internationally.

Dr. Rea is survived by his wife of 51 years, Mary, his two sons, Steven and Andrew, and four grandchildren.

He is greatly missed.

Maria T. Ochoa, MD, Seth Vaccaro, MD, Robert Jerskey OT, Helen Mora RN, Thomas H. Rea Hansen’s Disease Program at the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California (LAC + USC) Medical Center in Los Angeles

David Peng MD, Chair, Department of Dermatology, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California

Robert L. Modlin, MD, Chief, Division of Dermatology, David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA

If anyone would like to send a card to Mrs. Rea, her address is:

Mrs. Mary Rea
P.O. Box 1125
La Canada, CA 91012-1125