Obituary

Kuchukungu Prabhakaran (1927–2010)

The leprosy community lost a pioneer in leprosy research with the death of Dr. Kuchukunju Prabhakaran who passed away on Sunday, April 11, 2010 in Baton Rouge, LA. He was born in Anchal, Kerala, India in 1927, received his Ph.D in Biochemistry from the University of Bombay in 1965, joined the Laboratory Research Branch of the National Hansen’s Disease Programs in Carville, LA, USA soon thereafter and retired from Carville after 33 years of service.

Dr. Prabhakaran contributed substantially to our understanding of the unique biochemistry of M. leprae. He discovered and characterised the enzyme diphenyloxidase (DOPA) in extracts of M. leprae and showed that the enzyme was not present in other known mycobacteria. The detection of DOPA oxidase was used early on as an M. leprae-specific marker providing a means to identify M. leprae in tissue smears. Dr. Prabhakaran identified M. leprae’s glutamine decarboxylase, an enzyme capable of generating gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a chief inhibitory neurotransmitter in the mammalian central nervous system. He also demonstrated that M. leprae transports ATP from the host cell, explaining in part its host cell dependence. In his latter years he made seminal contributions to our understanding of M. leprae’s beta-lactamase enzyme providing a foundation for making ampicillin-sulbactam an effective antibiotic for killing M. leprae.

Dr. P, as he was known around the lab, was always cheerful and ready to help anyone in their scientific or personal pursuits. His memory will be greatly treasured by all who knew him.

Tom Gillis
Gene Harris