In Memoriam

Frank Michio Yatsu, MD
James C. Grotta, MD

Frank Michio Yatsu, MD, died unexpectedly but peacefully during a nap on Friday, March 9, 2012; he was 79 years old. He had been recovering from complications stemming from a kidney transplant he received several years ago. Frank had retired last year becoming Professor Emeritus of the Department of Neurology at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston but was still coming to work several hours a week to attend conferences, work on manuscripts, oversee his laboratory, and other administrative duties.

Frank was born in Los Angeles, CA, on November 28, 1932, the son of Frank K. and Iwao Yatsu who had immigrated to the United States from Matsushima, Japan, in 1906. His family had owned a bank in Japan but Frank’s parents were forced to work as “domestics” in Los Angeles and later in Cleveland. During World War II, the Yatsu family was relocated to an internment camp in Arizona. His older brother fought in a Japanese-American unit in North Africa and Italy where he was wounded. These experiences actually strengthened Frank’s desire to become integrated into the fabric of American society. Throughout his education and early career, Frank was often the first Japanese-American to gain positions of prominence, and he was intensely patriotic and proud of his American identity. At the same time, his childhood experiences established a lifelong commitment to tolerance and diversity in all forms.

Frank was always an outstanding student and won a full scholarship to Phillips Andover Academy and Brown University where he majored in English literature (he turned down a scholarship to Harvard because he liked the wrestling coach better at Brown). He remained an active alumnus of both institutions throughout his life and was the first Asian American appointed to Brown’s Board of Trustees. Wrestling and English literature were his passions, but his girlfriend and future wife, Michiko (Mich), urged him to volunteer at a local hospital, which jumpstarted his medical career. In 1955 he matriculated at Case Western Reserve University Medical School where he also served as Intern and Resident in Internal Medicine and from which he was named Alumnus of the Year in 2002. He then moved to New York City for his neurology training at the Neurological Institute of New York at Columbia–Presbyterian Medical Center under Dr. H. Houston Merritt and Fellowship in Neurochemistry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine under Dr Robert Katzman. After serving 2 years as Lt Commander at the US Naval Hospital in Great Lakes, IL, he then returned to the West Coast for his first academic appointment as Assistant Professor of Neurology at the University of California School of Medicine in San Francisco where he served as Chief of the Neurology Service at San Francisco General Hospital from 1967 to 1975 (Associate Professor from 1971 and vice chair of the department under Dr Robert Fishman from 1973). While at the University of California at San Francisco, Frank continued his National Institutes of Health-funded laboratory research in neurochemistry, specifically studying fatty acid synthesis and lipid metabolism with first-authored articles in journals such as *Nature* and the *Journal of Neurochemistry*. He was stimulated by the Nobel laureates Brown and Goldstein’s simultaneous studies at the University of Texas Southwestern demonstrating the relationship of lipids to atherosclerosis, which lent clinical relevance to Frank’s laboratory efforts. Throughout his career, Frank remained 1 of the few neurologists with bona fide laboratory studies into the biochemistry of lipid metabolism and its relationship to atherosclerosis and stroke.
His years in San Francisco were very happy ones for Frank and Mich whom he had married in 1955. Their daughter, Carolyn Elizabeth (Libby), was born in 1971. The Yatsu family made many friends in San Francisco and it remained 1 of his favorite travel destinations throughout his life. Some of his favorite stories pertained to experiences living next door to the Grateful Dead in Haight-Ashbury during the 1960s. I can imagine that Jerry Garcia got a kick out of Frank!! I met Frank for the first time when I was interviewing for residency at the University of California at San Francisco in early 1974; he was not impressed and I was not accepted into the program, something I never let him forget. Later, he introduced me to dim sum at his favorite spot (Yank Sing) at the Embarcadero.

In 1975 Frank and his family moved to Portland, OR, where he became Professor and Chairman of the Department of Neurology at Oregon Health Sciences University. While in Portland, Frank mentored several future leaders of the stroke field, including Robert Hart, Vince Miller, Bruce Coull, and Dennis Bourdette, and became Principal Investigator of the Comprehensive Stroke Center of Oregon, 1 of the first departments to establish an identified “stroke program.” He became interested in the relationship between oral contraceptives and stroke both clinically and at the molecular level in his laboratory. He also was a driving force in some of the first clinical trials aimed at reducing damage after ischemic stroke, in particular barbiturates and, later, prostacyclin, which he conducted in Houston. Anyone who has trained with Frank knows that he loved to use acronyms, and he was particularly fond of founding and naming the Portland Oregon Regional Neurological Organization (PORNO)!

In 1982, Frank was recruited to be the second chair of neurology at the relatively new University of Texas Medical School at Houston, succeeding Dr William Fields, another giant in the field of cerebrovascular disease. I had joined the faculty in 1979, and Frank graciously provided me encouragement and enough “space” to let me grow academically. His management style in dealing with daily academic conflicts was at the same time direct and nonconfrontational. When I would bring him a problem, he would call the relevant party on the phone and work out a compromise while I was still in the office. Frank always maintained a positive attitude even when facing serious personal medical problems in his final years. He always greeted you with a smile, usually accompanied by a joke, and often punctuated by some interesting observation from a book he had been reading. His funny and completely unpretentious nature made everyone feel comfortable around him, from janitors to senators alike. He would variously introduce himself as Italian, Hispanic, Jewish, or whatever color or stripe necessary to break the ice and make people laugh. He enjoyed teaching and always had a flair for entertaining and humor. He had an encyclopedic grasp of the medical literature; yes, we did check the references he recited so often during rounds that sometimes we doubted they really existed. It was always a treat when he gave grand rounds; usually centered around 1 of his patients, he would hold forth on the topic with flair, humor, and historical perspective for an entire hour without referring to notes or slides.

Frank was fully active in laboratory research throughout his career and obtained support from grateful patients and community leaders. He was appointed the Roy M. and Phyllis Gough Huffington Distinguished Chair and also received endowments from the Blood and Cullen trusts. He was never too busy or important to deliver personalized care for his patients. “The patient always comes first” was 1 of his favorite expressions; he even made house calls. Frank published >140 articles on the topics already mentioned. In addition to his many articles of original research on cholesterol metabolism and vascular smooth muscle, Frank is probably best known as Neurologist editor with J. P. Mohr of the authoritative text Stroke: Pathophysiology, Diagnosis and Management. At the time of his death, he maintained an active collaboration with Katsuri Ranganna, PhD, studying atherogenesis and vascular smooth muscle.

At home, the Yatsus enjoyed good food and wine with family, friends, and colleagues. While he was Chair, Frank hosted yearly 7-course meals, each with a different variety of wine, for the entire departmental faculty and spouses; they were a mixture of fun, class, and great taste. He loved symphony and opera and he and Mich hosted many intimate recitals by classical artists in their living room.

Frank stepped down as Department Chair in 1995. He and Mich had always loved traveling to international centers of culture and remote corners of the world. Those trips as well as frequent visits to his daughter and her family punctuated his later years. He was truly an international neurologist. He became Director of the Global Stroke Initiative of the World Health Organization and World Stroke Organization in 2004 and remained very active with both groups until he died.

When Mich informed me that Frank had died, she chose the words, “Frank Yatsu is no more.” That is not entirely true; his indelible personality, memory, and accomplishments will remain a part of everyone who was fortunate enough to have known him.

Frank’s family has requested that any donations in his honor be directed either to the “Annual Frank Yatsu Day Symposium Endowment” in care of the Department of Neurology, University of Texas Medical School, Suite 7.044, 6431 Fannin Street, Houston, TX 77030 or “Trustees of Phillips Academy for the Frank M. Yatsu Scholarship Fund” Phillips Academy, 180 Main Street, Andover, MA 01810.
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