

ASCO Remembers Rose Ruth Ellison, MD

Rose Ruth Ellison, MD, is considered one of the pioneers in cancer chemotherapy. Her journey in the medical field resulted in academic and



professional honors, numerous published research papers, and international recognition as a superb clinical investigator. The Society mourns the loss of this visionary oncologist, who died on September 27, 2009, at the age of 86, at her home near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

As ASCO's first female president, gender was never an issue for Dr. Ellison. In a 2005 interview with ASCO, she discussed how she had always felt accepted by her colleagues and had viewed herself as part of a group of people with the same interests in cancer. She explained that it hadn't occurred to her until much later on that her presence in the field, as a woman, was uncommon for the time. Similarly, she believed ASCO enabled oncology professionals to identify as part of a group of people working in a particular scientific fashion. She was noted for saying how the Society gave legitimacy to the field of oncology.

Dr. Ellison's term as ASCO President from 1974 to 1975 took place during a revolutionary time in cancer treatment. Oncology had taken a tremendous leap in knowledge and interest, and the potential for different combinations of surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy needed formal development. In addressing this issue throughout her presidency, Dr. Ellison stressed the need for a multidisciplinary approach to treatment. As these changes in the field became key issues, ASCO's development

was also growing rapidly. The Society had approximately 700 members when Dr. Ellison first began her presidency. After her term was completed, ASCO's membership increased to 800 members.

A Brief History

Dr. Ellison began her medical career as a lab technician at Rockefeller Institute. After 18 months of service, she enrolled in Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. She completed an internship and her residency in medicine at SUNY Downstate Medical Center College of Medicine, after which she chose hematology as an area of focus. Her experience had proven so captivating, she later applied for further training at an institution where she could see more patients with leukemia, lymphoma, and a variety of solid tumors.

Dr. Ellison eventually came to join the staff at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC). She was immersed in clinical chemotherapy during its earliest days, working alongside founding ASCO member Joseph Burchenal, MD, David Karnofsky, MD, and other pioneers. C.P. Rhoades, MD, head of the Sloan-Kettering Institute at the time, believed that abnormal cancer cells could be killed without irreparably damaging normal cells—a revolutionary concept in 1951.

In 1962, Dr. Ellison joined the chemotherapy group in Medicine at Roswell Park Cancer Institute, previously known as Roswell Park Memorial Institute. There, she worked with James F. Holland, MD, one of her future successors as ASCO President (1976-1977).

"Rose Ruth Ellison was an outstanding clinical investigator," Dr. Holland said. "The entire oncologic community was enriched by her presence and we are the poorer for her passing."

Dr. Holland recalled the time when Dr. Ellison first began working as a recruit at the institution. "David Karnofsky, a giant in the evolving field along with Joe Burchenal, cautioned me in a friendly older-brother sort of way—'Be good to her because she's the best we've got,'" he said.

Dr. Holland, who was Chief of Medicine at the time, came to name Dr. Ellison Associate Chief. The two worked together primarily dealing with acute leukemia, and Dr. Holland felt, "Rose Ruth was already an expert. She had published papers with Burchenal and Karnofsky reporting the first clinical activity of 6-Mercaptopurine. She had worked on 6-Chloropurine. She was an expert morphologist, and reviewed all the marrows of medicine. She had a lab of her own and worked on 4-aminoimidazole carboxamide as an intermediate of purine metabolism. She led our studies on cytosine arabinoside, first at a clinical pharmacologic level, then as a continuous infusion in the Acute Leukemia Group B," he said.

Furthermore, "her findings are still relevant," said Dr. Holland. "She was a master clinician, and great with the fellows in training and other members of the faculty at the time," including William Regelson, MD, Oleg Selawry, MD, Myroslaw Hreshchshyn, MD, and Giovanni Costa, MD.

Dr. Ellison continued with her work as head of the Oncology Division in the Department of Medicine at SUNY Buffalo. In 1978, after six years of service, she returned to Columbia University to head the Department of Medicine's Division of Oncology.

In 1989, she retired and moved with her husband to New Mexico. She devoted herself to her second specialty—art—producing a large number of well-received paintings, pastels, and collages.

Dr. Ellison leaves behind her husband, Arthur, and children, Susy and Jordan. [AN&F](#)