

Gerald E. McClearn 1927-2017: A Founding Father of Behavioral Genetics

We regret to announce the sad news that Gerald E. “Jerry” McClearn died Thursday, January 5, 2017 in State College, PA. In his 89 years, Jerry had a long and successful career as a leader in the field of behavioral genetics. He received an undergraduate degree from Allegheny College and a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Wisconsin, after which he spent a year as an instructor at Yale University, and a year as an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Allegheny College. Jerry also conducted postdoctoral research at Edinburgh University in Scotland and the University College London, in England. He moved on to the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley from 1956-1965, after which he joined the Department of Psychology at University of Colorado Boulder as an Associate and, later, full Professor from 1965-1981. It was during his early years at Colorado that Jerry devised his plan to form a research institute, now known as the Institute for Behavioral Genetics (IBG), dedicated to research and teaching in behavioral genetics. It was also during those years that he became a founding member of the Behavioral Genetics Association and served as one of the first presidents of the Association in 1974. He was truly a founding father of the field.

During his years at IBG, Jerry’s research was focused on using mouse models to investigate the genetics of behavior, especially ethanol consumption, in seminal work begun at Berkeley using a technique known as the two-bottle choice test. He liked to refer to these studies as “simulacra” (partial models) for human alcohol abuse and alcoholism. He also had a strong interest in human behavioral genetic studies, especially those characterizing the influence of genetic factors on cognition. As a result, he participated in a number of landmark studies, including the Hawaii Family Study of Cognition. This study, along with other human studies conducted subsequently, fed Jerry’s interest in the genetics of cognitive aging, which was the focus of much of his research in his later career.

In 1981, Jerry moved to The Pennsylvania State University as a professor of Human Development, Nutrition and Psychology and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies. In 1986 he was named an Evan Pugh Professor of Health and Human Development, the highest endowed chair at the University. In 1988 he formed the Center for Developmental and Health Genetics and served as its director from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1994 to 2002. In the interim he established the Program in Biobehavioral Health in 1990 and served as the Dean of the College of Health and Human Development. The program became a full department in 1992. Jerry retired with emeritus status from the Department of Biobehavioral Health (BBH) in July of 2011.

Jerry spent many years collaborating with colleagues in Sweden on cognitive abilities in elderly twins and was named an Adjunct Professor, University College of Health Sciences, Jönköping, Sweden.

Jerry received numerous awards and accolades during his career. Three of his awards have special importance: he received the Dobzhansky Award in 1989 from the Behavioral Genetics Association in recognition of lifetime accomplishments in behavioral genetics; in 2009 he received the Robert W. Kleemeier Award from the Gerontological Society of America for his outstanding research in the field of gerontology; and he was named a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2011 for his “...distinguished contributions in research exploring the interaction of genetic and environmental factors in the development of complex phenotypes of behavior and of aging.”

Jerry’s family has asked that anyone wishing to make a contribution in his memory do so to the Gerald E. McClearn Graduate Student Award in Health and Human Development; Mail to: the Office of Development 325 HHD Building, University Park, PA 16802. Gifts can be made on line at www.GiveTo.psu.edu/McClearnGraduateAward. The McClearn Graduate Student Award’s purpose is to honor

and recognize outstanding achievement by a graduate student majoring in Biobehavioral Health at Penn State.

Toni N. Smolen

Associate Director, Institute for Behavioral Genetics (retired)

Institute for Behavioral Genetics Faculty Fellow

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