

IRVING T. NATHANSON
Obituary - - 1904-1954

On May 3, 1954, Dr. Ira T. Nathanson lectured to second-year students at the Harvard Medical School on "The Natural History of Cancer," a subject on which he was a great authority. He finished his lecture and was leaving the amphitheater when he collapsed and died. He died of coronary heart disease at the early age of 49.

In spite of his comparative youth, Ira Nathanson had established himself as an outstanding investigator in cancer research and cancer surgery. He had one consuming object in life—the conquest of cancer—and he devoted his whole working life to this problem. His boyhood was spent in the city of his birth, Virginia, Minnesota, where he received his early training. He was a bright scholar and an outstanding debater. Later, he went on to study at the University of Pennsylvania where he excelled academically and also participated in football. Following this, he attended Northwestern Medical School in Chicago where he received an M.D. and M.S. degree, followed by 5 years of training at the Michael Reese Hospital. In 1934 and 1935 he was associated with the Pondville Hospital in Massachusetts. It was at this time that he was attracted to the work of the Collis P. Huntington Memorial Hospital, particularly the research on the relation of internal secretions to cancer. And so he came to the Huntington Laboratories—this was to be his niche.

He worked very hard as a surgeon, studying the natural course of cancer and how it was influenced by surgery and x-ray. And in addition to his work in surgery, he found time to analyze the activity of the internal secretions of his patients. For years he went through the arduous analyses, separating the sex hormones chemically with the relatively crude methods of that period. The laboratory was small, his technical help

limited, but his insatiable desire to accumulate data drove him to work unceasingly. And gradually a greater understanding emerged of the relation of the sex hormones to cancer of sex-linked organs.

Ira Nathanson's course was not one without interruption. A bout with tuberculosis forced him to rest for a period of 6 months. Surmounting it, he returned to his work with renewed determination and intensified efforts.

When the Huntington Memorial Hospital moved to the Massachusetts General Hospital in February 1942,

Dr. Nathanson, of course, came too. Insistent that he was primarily a surgeon, he was attached to its surgical service. In the intervening years, he became Associate Clinical Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School, Associate Surgeon at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Executive Secretary of the Tumor Clinic, and Surgeon at Pondville Hospital. He has been the Coordinator of Cancer Teaching and also served on the University Committee for Cancer Research and Training at the Harvard Medical School.

During the war, the Huntington Laboratories devoted their efforts to the study of wound shock. To this Dr. Nathanson contributed materially. When the emergency was over, his mind again focused on the therapeutic effects of the sex hormones on cancer of the breast and prostate—in other terms, the reaction of tumors to their environment. As financial support increased, he had a series of distinguished associates who collaborated with him in his work and eliminated the need for his doing laborious chemical analyses. Out of these efforts emerged a clear delineation of beneficial and injurious effects which can be elicited by administering sex hormones to cancer patients. There was also other work on analogous lines—work on animals.

Over the years there were great demands for him

to serve on medical and scientific boards. He served as Chairman of the Therapeutic Trials Panel of the American Medical Association and member of the Committee on Growth, and Chairman of the Committee of Cancer Diagnosis and Therapy of the National Research Council. His tremendous interest and great conscientiousness led him to accept such assignments without hesitation. Needless to say, he soon became overwhelmed by administrative work. He was universally sought after as a wise counselor and able director of committee deliberations, and a dynamic lecturer. With ever increasing demands upon him, he added these new responsibilities to an already very full life, for this was the way Ira Nathanson wanted to spend his life.

Students and interns loved him, because teaching was one of his great pleasures, and he did it outstandingly well. He was never too busy to teach young men. From an undergraduate at the Medical School came the words: "Ira Nathanson, a scholar, was a great teacher, for his students loved him." All his students and patients were devoted to him, because of his loyalty, helpfulness, and understanding. His capacity for friendship was tremendous. One came to realize this when his death stimulated the verbal appreciation of his countless friends.

Dr. Nathanson's one consuming interest was his work, with a great loyalty to his Hospital and his adopted University. He allowed few things to divert him from his dominant interest. His other great interest was his parents, and the care of them. Throughout his life he maintained a great devotion to his family. That he had the strength to carry on as he did gives some comfort. Ill health would not have become him. Ira Nathanson gave much to the world; he still had much to give.

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