

Obituary



State University of New York at Stony Brook

Marvin Kuschner

Expert pathologist who, as founding dean, oversaw and nurtured the growth of the medical school at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA, from birth to international prominence.

Born Aug 13, 1919, in New York City; died aged 83 years from complications of pneumonia after a fractured hip in New York City on Oct 18, 2002.

Marvin Kuschner, founding dean of the medical school at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, welcomed the school's first 24 students in 1972. The early atmosphere at the school was so relaxed, recalled Norman Edelman, now vice president of the Health Sciences Center at Stony Brook, that Kuschner told stories of also welcoming a dog to classes held in temporary buildings.

Kuschner came to Stony Brook from New York University, where he was professor of pathology, and Bellevue Hospital, where he was director of pathology, in 1970. Edmund D Pellegrino, now emeritus professor of medicine and medical ethics at Georgetown University, was then vice president of Stony Brook, in charge of the medical school and six other schools at the campus. "I gestated and conceived it, but Marvin gets the credit for getting that school going and making it what it is", Pellegrino told *The Lancet*. Between 1972 and 1987, when Kuschner retired, the school's faculty increased from 40 to 500, and its budget from \$2 million to nearly \$100 million. The school's graduating class now numbers about 110 people each year.

"He was a very engaging, charming person", Edelman told *The Lancet*. "He was a wonderful guy who went out to this new medical school, and just inspired confidence in people. Very excellent people were willing to take a chance. He did a superb job, not so much because of the facilities but because people trusted Marvin to steer them the right way." Although the medical school could have taken many directions, including focusing on primary care, as did other schools at the time, Kuschner, in keeping with the rest of the university, ensured that the focus was on research. He was "very capable of dealing with great patience with the bureaucracy of the state university system", Pellegrino said. "He was a politician in the best sense of the word."

Kuschner also appreciated the mastery of state government possessed by Stony Brook's vice president for health sciences, Howard Oaks, now deceased, but sometimes had difficulty explaining Oaks' tactics, according to Daniel Fox, then Stony Brook's academic vice president for health sciences and now president of the

Milbank Memorial Fund, which studies health policy. One day Kuschner presented Howard with a demand from the department chairs that he go to Albany and insist that the medical school be given something or other. "Howard frowned", Fox recalled. Kuschner then said, "Howard, we will fly to Albany, then we will buy apples from the apple growers' machine in Albany airport; then we will fly home". Kuschner would also walk out of any meeting in which anyone uttered the words "markets" or "parking".

Kuschner was named "most ambitious" by classmates at Madison High School, from which he graduated in 1935. He received his bachelor's degree, in 1939, and medical degree, in 1943, from New York University. During World War II, he served as a pathologist in the War Crimes Branch of the 7th Army, taking the lead in doing autopsies of concentration camp prisoners. It was also during the war that he met his wife Katherine, a nurse, who died earlier this year.

Kuschner's students at New York University remembered him as a "giant among giants". Every Friday, he would lead house staff in a clinical/pathological session with such legendary figures as Lewis Thomas, Saul J Farber, and H Sherwood Lawrence. Lessons from those conferences remain with students to this day.

As a pathologist, Kuschner was one of the first researchers to study the effects of pollutants, including tobacco, on the lungs. He published papers on lung pathology in uranium miners and patients exposed to beryllium, and on the effects of various environmental pollutants—including, glass fibres, hydrochloric acid, dimethylcarbamoyl chloride, epichlorohydrin, and formaldehyde. Until just a few years ago, he continued to do autopsies at Stony Brook.

Despite his "profound understanding of environmental policy and the risks associated with policy alternatives as a result of his work as a pathologist", Kuschner "always waved away my pleas to teach more policy to medical students", Fox told *The Lancet*. "Biochemistry is cultural; policy is not", he would say.

He is survived by a son, Jason, and two grandchildren. He is remembered, Pellegrino said, as "a leader in medical education and pathology".

Ivan Oransky

e-mail:

ivan-oransky@erols.com