

An international journal dedicated to avian health

Avian Diseases

Published Quarterly by the American Association of Avian Pathologists

Vol. 68 No. 2 June 2024 Pages 89–168
www.aaapjournals.info

DR. RICHARD L. (DICK) WITTER

aaap
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF AVIAN PATHOLOGISTS

About the cover

DR. RICHARD L. (DICK) WITTER (1936)

Richard L. “Dick” Witter was born September 10, 1936, in Bangor, Maine, and later graduated from Michigan State University with a BS in 1958 and DVM in 1960 with high honors. While at MSU, Dick met Joan Elizabeth Denny, whom he married in 1962 and they had two children. After graduating from MSU, he obtained MS and PhD degrees at Cornell University under the tutelage of P.P. Levine, Julius Fabricant and Bruce Calnek. After MS and PhD completion, he began his long and distinguished career in East Lansing, Michigan at USDA’s Regional Poultry Research Laboratory, whose name he helped change in 1991 to the present USDA-ARS Avian Disease & Oncology Laboratory. He worked at ADOL from 1964–2002, and was the director from 1975–1998. Dick spent his career working on avian tumor viruses, with a particular focus on Marek’s disease (MD) and occasional digressions with reticuloendotheliosis virus (REV) and avian leukosis virus (ALV). When myeloid tumors in broiler breeders became an industry problem in the 1990s, Dick instituted a crash program on the causative virus, ALV subgroup J. He is known especially for his work on MD vaccine development, elucidation of viral pathotypes, and documentation of the evolution of this virus to greater virulence. Although MD emerged in the 1960s as a major scourge of the poultry industry, vaccination has reduced disease incidence by 2–4 orders of magnitude over the ensuing decades. A few major accomplishments include:

- Isolated and characterized turkey herpesvirus (HVT), which became the first MD vaccine used in the United States. It is still in use today.
- Developed several additional MD vaccine strains. Contributed data which was used to validate strain CVI988 for use in the United States.
- Discovered and characterized phenomenon of synergism among certain MD vaccine viruses, which is the basis for bivalent vaccination.
- Documented the propensity of Marek’s disease virus (MDV) to evolve to greater virulence in chicken populations.
- Developed and standardized techniques to classify MDV strains by pathotype.
- Isolated and characterized a large collection of MDV strains that are heavily used today.

Dr. Witter has been a long-time supporter of AAAP. He joined in 1963, chaired the leukosis committee, served on the AVMA program committee, and served as president of AAAP from 1987–1988. In 1993 he joined the history committee, a committee of which his father was the first chair. Major contributions include his lecture and historical article, *Origin and Evolution of the American Association of Avian Pathologists: 50 Years of Dedication and Accomplishment*, as well as his launching of the Biography Project. He has continued to be a driving leader in AAAP historical preservation and of the poultry industry more generally. As chair of the Tumor Virus Committee, he chaired the 1969 AAAP Leukosis Workshop (Las Vegas) and the 1970 AAAP Leukosis Symposium (Detroit). Dick also chaired the 2000 AAAP Annual Meeting. In recognition of his dedication to AAAP, Dick received the Special Service Award in 1998 and Life Membership in 2007. Other significant accolades include his election into the National Academy of Sciences, USDA-ARS Hall of Fame, AAAP Hall of Honor, and World Veterinary Poultry Association Hall of Honour.

Please visit Dick’s AAAP biography for more information.

Submitted by John Dunn