

Obituary



Dr. Ben Roy Burmester

Dr. Ben R. Burmester died on October 10, 2009 in Petaluma, California at the age of 99. He was born on June 13, 1910, in Petaluma where he was first exposed to the poultry industry. He earned B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of California, Berkeley. He later received the D.V.M degree from Michigan State University. After 4 years at the University of Illinois, he joined the staff of the USDA Regional Poultry Laboratory in East Lansing, Michigan in 1940, only a year after its dedication.

Hired as the avian physiologist in the laboratory's original multidisciplinary team, he soon moved into virology and identified the viral etiology of avian leukosis. The RPL-12 strain of avian retrovirus that he isolated from the transplantable Olson tumor was used as a prototype for years. His early work on virology and transmission of avian leukosis laid the groundwork for subsequent laboratory tests for the virus and the eradication programs that resulted in practical control of this infection.

Ben became director of the Regional Poultry Research Laboratory (now Avian Disease and Oncology Laboratory) in 1964. He launched and administered a significant program on Marek's disease, which culminated in the isolation of the causative virus and development of the first US vaccine based on the turkey herpesvirus. This and subsequent vaccines have provided effective control of Marek's disease throughout the world. He retired in 1974.

During his career, Ben served in a number of administrative roles. He was a charter member of AAAP and served as its 4th president. He also served as president of the World Veterinary Poultry Association from 1977-81. He played a key role in bringing the WVPA meeting to Atlanta in 1977, the first joint meeting of the WVPA and AAAP. He was elected a Life Member of AAAP in 1983. His dedication to international relationships in science was a hallmark of his career.

He is considered one of the original pioneers in cancer virology. He received more than 20 major awards, including election to the Poultry Hall of Fame. After retirement, he continued to live in East Lansing for several years where he enjoyed a continuing association with his former laboratory including participation (with Jagdev Sharma) in the original description of embryo vaccination to control Marek's disease. Later he lived near his family in California and Idaho.

He was married to Dr. Mary Alice Burmester, who died in 1977, and then to Zoe Barrons Burmester, who died in 2008. He is survived by a daughter, Elizabeth Ann Alderman of Petaluma, CA and two sons, Alan F. Burmester of Midland, Michigan and Bruce J. Burmester of Oxnard, California. He built a family cottage at Bass Lake, near Pentwater, Michigan, which is still a family treasure. Many friends will remember this cottage as well as his East Lansing home as places of genuine hospitality.

Additional information may be found in a biography posted on the AAAP website.