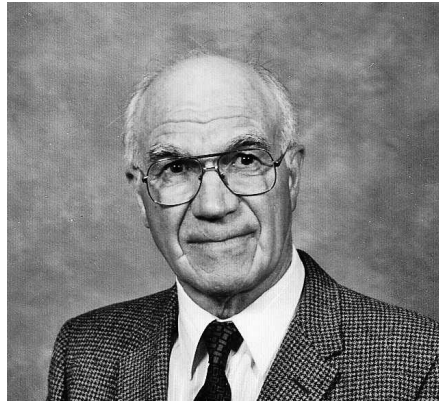


Obituary



Dr. Stephen B. Hitchner 1916–2011

Dr. Stephen B. Hitchner, noted avian pathologist, died January 1, 2011, at his home in Salisbury, Maryland. He was 94. Dr. Hitchner was well known in the veterinary profession for his discovery in 1947 of a strain of the Newcastle disease virus that resulted in a vaccine protecting poultry flocks from Newcastle epidemics.

Stephen was born the son of a tenant farmer in Daretown, a small community in southern New Jersey, on February 4, 1916. After attending the Daretown grammar school and Woodstown High, graduating in 1933, Stephen helped his father farm until 1936 but eventually craved greater independence. Urged by his older brother, Ralph, he enrolled at Rutgers University, where he lived in the University's Poultry Building and earned his way through school. He later described it this way:

"To work your way through agricultural college was an accepted practice during that period, and that was the way I expected to get through. The college provided a number of opportunities. One that I took advantage of was a 20' × 24' laying house provided for students to maintain a chicken flock while going to school. I was awarded the use of one of these houses, and raised a flock of 120 leghorn pullets to take to college with me. In addition there were rooms in the attic of some of the Ag buildings to which students were assigned living quarters in exchange for 72 hours of labor during the year. I was awarded one of the rooms in the top of the Poultry Building along with two other freshmen."

Encouraged by a Rutgers professor, Stephen enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania Veterinary School. On March 27, 1943, a week before graduation and immediate induction into the U.S. Army, he married Mariana White in Cape May Court House, NJ. For 3 years Dr. Hitchner served in the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps, attaining the rank of captain while pursuing research in the bat caves of Mexico and other locales.

Freed from military service, Dr. Hitchner reentered academia for 6 years as a lecturer and research scientist, first in the Department of Veterinary Science at Virginia Polytechnic University in Blacksburg and next in a comparable department at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. During this early career he earned distinction by developing a vaccine to protect poultry against Newcastle disease, which was decimating commercial flocks. He openly described the discovery as an "accident" and later advised his grandchildren that "if they keep their eyes and ears open, and the wheels in their brain churning, they too may make an unexpected discovery purely by accident when looking for something else." With that discovery as a springboard, he was recruited to a commercial vaccine producer, American Scientific Labs (ASL) in Madison, WI. For 7 years in Wisconsin, he developed his career, raised his young family with Mariana, and operated a small poultry farm.

In 1960, Stephen and two colleagues from ASL joined a new start-up poultry vaccine producer, L&M Laboratory, on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The business flourished as Maryland's poultry business grew, attracting purchase by Abbott Labs, the large pharmaceutical company. When Abbott moved the founding scientists to its headquarters in Waukegan, IL, Dr. Hitchner found large corporate life not to his liking. After 1 year, he accepted an offer from Cornell University to be chairman of its department of avian diseases in its College of Veterinary Medicine. He moved the family to Ithaca, NY, where he served in that department for 15 years, continuing research and teaching an international cast of students until retirement in 1981.

Retired and the five children grown, Stephen and Mariana chose to return to Maryland's Eastern Shore, building a house near the small, historic college town of Chestertown. There for 15 years, they enjoyed the bay and its bird life, tended their garden, attended classes, helped found a Unitarian fellowship and served as quiet, steady models of integrity, intellectual independence, and self-reliance. During this period, Stephen volunteered on several international trips as a consulting veterinarian for aid organizations. When maintaining a house became difficult in 2000, Stephen and Mariana followed friends who had moved to Mallard Landing, a senior living community in Salisbury.

Stephen is survived by Mariana, his wife of 67 years; his children Roger, Sarabelle, Thomas, and Robert; a sister Eva; and eight grandchildren. Stephen, Jr., his eldest and a Rhodes Scholar, died of cancer in 1991.