

UT Southwestern Medical Center

Dr. Donald W. Seldin, ‘intellectual father’ of UT Southwestern, dies

April 25, 2018

It is with profound sadness that I write to inform you of the passing of Dr. Donald W. Seldin, Professor and Chairman Emeritus of Internal Medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center. Dr. Seldin died early this morning. He was 97. Speaking for the entire UT Southwestern community, we offer our most heartfelt condolences to his wife, Ellen, and the rest of his family as well as his many friends and colleagues here and around the world.

Dr. Seldin was a legend at the Medical Center. His contributions placed him among the most distinguished medical educators in the history of academic medicine. His 67-year legacy at UT Southwestern – his dedication to educating generations of top medical professionals, as well as his success in transforming a small nascent medical school into one of the nation’s premier medical centers – resulted in Dr. Seldin’s long-acknowledged reputation as the “intellectual father” of UT Southwestern.

In his 36 years as Chairman of Internal Medicine, he held a singular view of what an academic department should be and built an outstanding department around that vision – which has been emulated across the country.

Dr. Seldin’s career at UT Southwestern started in 1951. The New York native was recruited to then Southwestern Medical School of The University of Texas from Yale University, where he had graduated from medical school in 1943 and, after serving in the Army, where he held his first faculty appointment. He accepted the position in Dallas sight unseen and was surprised to find a medical school housed in converted Army barracks known as “The Shacks.” Within one year, he became the sole remaining member of the Department of Internal Medicine. The 31-year-old New Yorker thought seriously about returning home but, instead, accepted the challenge and became Chairman of the Department that he would soon bring to great acclaim.

Dr. Seldin led the Department of Internal Medicine from 1952 until 1988. During his tenure, he garnered renown for identifying, motivating, and nurturing talented students, residents, and fellows who went on to become distinguished leaders and faculty members in the academic world. He felt that the greatest advantage UT Southwestern had over established prestigious Eastern schools was that it wasn’t encumbered by tradition. At the older schools, young professors had to wait their turn to become leaders. Dr. Seldin and his colleagues told recruits they could make a name for themselves more quickly at UT Southwestern. Many heard the message, including Dr. Michael Brown and Dr. Joseph Goldstein, who in 1985 became the first among UT Southwestern faculty to receive the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Widely admired as one of the greatest chairs of internal medicine in American medical history, Dr. Seldin was a visionary, a tenacious leader, and a demanding yet patient teacher. He garnered innumerable teaching honors, was an early member of the prestigious Institute of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, served as President of seven major medical societies, and received six honorary degrees, including one from Yale University, his alma mater, and another from the Université de Paris VI – Pierre et Marie Curie. In addition, several chairs at UT Southwestern have been created in his honor.

Recently, Dr. Seldin was honored with a singular recognition at the “front door” of the South Campus. The Dr. Donald Seldin Plaza was dedicated on March 16, 2015, and a 7-foot bronze statue of Dr. Seldin was unveiled, along with an accompanying plaque commemorating his service. Donations in honor of Dr. Seldin may be directed to UT Southwestern Medical Center, P.O. Box 910888, Dallas, TX 75391-0888 or online at engage.utsouthwestern.edu.

Although Dr. Seldin will be deeply missed by all who knew him, his enduring legacy will live on at UT Southwestern.

Daniel K. Podolsky, M.D.
President, UT Southwestern Medical Center