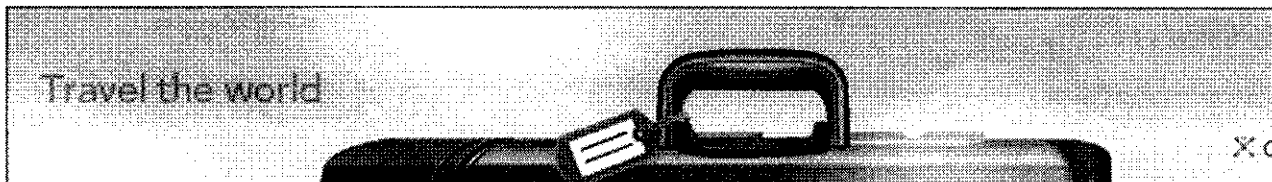




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Dr. Robert W. Wissler: 1917 - 2006

'Proselytizer for eating right'

Longtime U. of C. professor discovered a connection between diet and heart disease that prompted him to tout exercise and healthy eating for children

By Trevor Jensen Tribune staff reporter Published December 5, 2006

Dr. Robert W. Wissler was a University of Chicago professor whose research on the links between diet and heart disease showed that even the very young should exercise and watch what they eat to avoid problems later in life.

Dr. Wissler, 89, died Tuesday, Nov. 28, at the University of Chicago's Bernard Mitchell Hospital, said his daughter Barbara Mayers. Three weeks earlier, he was hospitalized for a respiratory arrest caused by an infection, she said.

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Dr. Wissler was chairman of the U. of C.'s pathology department from 1957 to 1972. From 1977 to his retirement in 1987, he held the Donald N. Pritzker Distinguished Service chair in pathology. After his official retirement, he continued to be active at the school as professor emeritus.

While teaching graduate and undergraduate classes as well as medical students, Dr. Wissler was a prolific researcher who put what he learned about the heart and diet into practice in his everyday life.

"In the non-scientific world, he was a proselytizer for eating right," said Mayers, who couldn't recall her father indulging in any guilty pleasures at the dining table.

Research by Dr. Wissler and his colleagues using rhesus monkeys showed that medication and diet can reverse atherosclerosis, the buildup of fatty deposits on arterial walls that is a major cause of heart disease.



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Dr. Wissler helped put together a large study in the mid-1980s that indicated that a buildup of deposits on artery walls starts early in life without any apparent symptoms. One conclusion was that even children should maintain a good diet and embrace exercise.

"He was a very energetic worker," said Godfrey Getz, a pathology professor at the U. of C. who was recruited to the school by Dr. Wissler in the mid-1960s. "He got his hands dirty."

Dr. Wissler "was a great proponent of prevention," Getz said.

"He was right at the top of the field of preventive pathology," he said.

Dr. Wissler grew up in Indiana, the son of schoolteachers. At Earlham College, where he graduated in 1939, several of his professors had studied at the U. of C., leading him to the Hyde Park school for graduate work.

During World War II, he did research on nutrition and immunology for the armed services. He earned a doctorate in pathology in 1946 and a medical degree two years later, both from the U. of C.

Dr. Wissler's family dinner table was regularly laden with the tomatoes, squash, beans and other vegetables that he grew at his home in Michigan, Mayers said. With his wife, Betty, whom he married in 1940, Dr. Wissler was active in the Hyde Park neighborhood.

He belonged to many professional groups, holding offices such as president and vice president of the American Board of Pathology. Dr. Wissler, a camera buff, thoroughly documented his trips to conferences.

In addition to his wife and daughter, Dr. Wissler is survived by a son, John; another daughter, Mary Graham; six grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

A service is planned for after the new year.

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