

Cyril L. Comar

March 28, 1914 — June 11, 1979

Prior to a planned appearance before a Congressional panel on health effects of low-level radiation, Cyril L. Comar, at the age of 65, died of a heart attack in Palo Alto, California. Cyril retired from Cornell in 1975 as professor emeritus and joined the Electric Power Research Institute in Palo Alto as director of the Environmental Assessment Department. He is survived by his supportive and loving wife, Mildred Cashin Comar; their three children, Anne Patricia, Thomas Allan, and Louise Elaine; and one grandchild.

Born in Dudley, England, Cyril became a United States citizen in 1941. After completing a Bachelor of Science degree at Berkeley in 1936 and a doctoral degree at Purdue University in 1941, he held positions at Michigan State University and the University of Florida. He became director of the University of Tennessee-Atomic Energy Commission Agriculture Research Program at Oak Ridge in 1948, developing a highly regarded research program on the application of radioisotope tracers in biological research and on the effects of radiation (both internal and external) on animals. He then became chief of biomedical research at the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies (1954). While in this position, he published the book entitled *Radioisotopes in Biology and Agriculture, Principles and Practice*, which was to become an important reference for workers in the field for more than two decades. During this and later periods, important contributions to knowledge of mineral metabolism were made, particularly on the physiological aspects of calcium and phosphorus, and the relative transfer of calcium and strontium through the biosphere. He and Dr. Felix Bronner edited a five-volume series entitled *Mineral Metabolism, An Advanced Treatise*, which contains authoritative reports by world experts.

In 1957 Cyril came to Cornell as professor and director of the Laboratory of Radiation Biology in the Department of Physiology of the New York State Veterinary College. In 1960 the Department of Physical Biology was created in the Veterinary College with Cyril as chairman. The focus of the department was to further the application of physical and mathematical approaches to biology. From this effort a research and teaching program evolved that won national recognition and attracted many scholars from abroad. Cyril organized the International Training Courses on Radioisotopes in Agricultural Research sponsored by the United States Atomic Energy Commission and by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency. This program trained many scientists throughout the world in radioisotope methodology and gave them an appreciation of the peaceful uses of atomic energy and the potential problems unique to the nuclear age. Cyril was also instrumental in the development and organization of research programs in the nuclear field in Yugoslavia and other foreign countries.

He was very much concerned with the potential hazards of radiation and as part of this concern prepared a booklet entitled *Fallout* for the United States Atomic Energy Commission (1963). He was chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Biological Effects of Ionizing Radiation of the National Academy of Science-National Research Council. Six years of work by the committee culminated in the report entitled *The Effects on Populations of Exposure to Low Levels of Ionizing Radiation* (1972). He served on many other significant national and international advisory groups in the radiation, energy, and environmental fields.

With characteristic foresight, Cyril turned his enthusiasm and intellect to the general problem of energy, a problem that is currently of great concern to the American public. While still chairing the Department of Physical Biology, he initiated and directed for several years the Cornell Energy Project. He left Cornell to assume his post with the Electric Power Research Institute where he worked until his untimely death.

Cyril was a member of numerous learned and professional societies including the American Institute of Nutrition, the American Society of Biological Chemists, the American Chemical Society, Phi Kappa Phi, and Sigma Xi, and was an honorary member of the American Veterinary Medical Association. He published over two hundred original articles in the scientific literature. In 1957 the city of Paris awarded Cyril its medal of honor for his organizational contribution to the UNESCO Conference on Radioisotopes in Scientific Research. In 1968 the American Institute of Nutrition honored him with the Borden Award for his studies in mineral metabolism.

A scientist with a keen intellect who enjoyed solving problems of all kinds, Cyril was indeed an independent thinker and scholar. From him, one was assured a considered and reasonable point of view, underpinned by as many available facts as possible. A strength was his analytical ability; his counsel, always available, was sought by many persons. His was not an angry voice on controversial issues, but he expressed his views in a strong, convincing manner and these were based on his analytical and balanced thinking. He was a man who was fully involved in life's activities and concerns, be it accompanying his wife on bird-watching expeditions or serving on an international committee. There was a spirit of enthusiasm and zest that was characteristic of him, a spirit that was infectious and influential on others. Consistent with his full approach to life were Cyril's final moments, spent in vigorous handball competition, a sport he avidly and skillfully played.

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