

# John F. Cummings

*September 3, 1936 — November 3, 1996*

John F. Cummings, James Law Professor of Anatomy, played a major role in the College of Veterinary Medicine during his twenty-nine years as a faculty member. In addition to having primary responsibility for teaching histology and organology, an essential body of knowledge for all veterinary students, John mounted a significant research program in and made major contributions to the area of animal models of human neurologic disease. He was responsible for the early and sustained development of ultrastructural technology in the college. He also contributed greatly to the life of the college, at one time or another serving on most of the standing committees of the college and being the Secretary of the College for the last two years of his life.

John was born in Newark, New Jersey, where he lived until age fifteen, at which time he moved to Syracuse, New York. His high school years were spent at Seton Hall Preparatory School in Newark and at Christian Brothers Academy in Syracuse where, according to John, he received the rigorous training in study methods and critical thinking that became cornerstones for his professional life.

In the fall of 1954, John matriculated at Cornell University, where he earned a B.S. degree from the College of Agriculture in 1958, and then D.V.M., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees from the College of Veterinary Medicine in 1962, 1963, and 1965, respectively. In 1965, he was commissioned as a First Lieutenant in the Veterinary Corps of the U.S. Army and was assigned to the Department of Neurophysiology, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Washington, D.C. The Army granted him an honorary discharge with the rank of Captain in 1967.

John was appointed as Assistant Professor of Anatomy in the College of Veterinary Medicine in 1967 and given primary responsibility for the teaching of histology, organology, and ultrastructure to first year veterinary students. He was promoted to Associate Professor of Anatomy in 1971 and to Professor of Anatomy in 1977.

John's greatest contribution to the College of Veterinary Medicine was as a teacher. Although his primary efforts were directed toward the teaching of microscopic anatomy to first year students, he was a regular contributor to other courses in the curriculum. Scientists around the world looked to John as a valuable source of information on light microscopic and ultrastructural anatomy of domestic animals.

As a teacher of veterinary students, John's standards for excellence were high. He demanded superior performance but strived to help his students achieve it. He always was available to assist the students at any time of the day

or night. As much as students lamented his rigorous examinations, they truly respected his goals and efforts; moreover, they knew that they were well-prepared for their professional activities. John's constant "one liner" style of humor and his ability to correlate structure with function and with clinically relevant problems kept the undivided attention of his students.

Throughout his professional career, the goal of John's research was to identify neurological disorders in domestic animals that were models for similar human disorders. He recognized and described a variety of these models that ranged from acute to chronic peripheral neuropathies, to storage diseases due to inherited enzyme deficiencies, to numerous examples of central nervous system axonopathies, to delayed organophosphate intoxication, to muscle disorders, and to motor neuron disease.

There were two diseases in which his studies contributed the most to the understanding of comparable human disease. Early in his career, John described the clinical and pathological basis for polyradiculoneuritis of dogs (Coonhound paralysis) that was a model for the Landry-Guillain-Barre disease, the most common cause of total paralysis in people. Since 1990, John Cummings led the efforts in the recognition, description, and research of an acquired motor neuron disease in the horse that is a model for the sporadic form of motor neuron disease in people which is known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) or Lou Gehrig's disease. He made great strides in understanding the cause of this equine disease which had a direct impact on the understanding of the human disorder, and he was actively engaged in these efforts when his untimely death occurred.

John's extensive compilation of publications gave him an international reputation as an outstanding contributor to the knowledge of domestic animal peripheral nerve and motor neuronal disorders. John shared his knowledge enthusiastically and his peers considered him an ideal colleague for collaboration in their scholarly efforts.

John Cummings was one of the most popular and beloved professors at the Veterinary College. He was renown for his brilliant intellect, his wonderful sense of humor, his modesty, and his unrelenting willingness to help others. In 1994, he was honored by being elected Secretary of the Faculty, a position he held until his death. His mastery of the English language and keen sense of humor were greatly appreciated and guaranteed that each monthly edition of the faculty minutes was read by virtually every faculty member.

In 1995, in recognition of the esteem with which he was held by his colleagues for his distinguished career in comparative neurology and neuropathology, John was awarded the endowed title of James Law Professor of Anatomy. He was a member of Phi Zeta, Sigma Xi, Pi Kappa Phi, and Gamma Sigma Delta honor societies. The

Cornell University Veterinary College faculty and alumni further honored his memory by dedicating the 1997 Annual Conference as a celebration to his life. This was the first time in the hundred-year history of the college that the Annual Conference was dedicated to an individual.

In addition to the college and the university, John was also devoted to his family, his church, and his community. He spent many hours at Lynah Rink, Cass Park, the Lansing town ball fields, and other athletic venues as his children developed their prowess in hockey, baseball, softball, and other sports. On weekends and summer evenings, he was often in the yard with them, teaching the finer points of several sports. He was involved as well in their scholastic development and expected as much from them as he did from his students. The fruits of his labors shine in the success that each of his children has enjoyed.

John was convinced of the importance of athletics in child development and served for many years as a member and as the chair of the Town of Lansing Athletic Commission. During his tenure, the facilities available for athletic programs in the town were expanded significantly. A strong supporter of Cornell athletics, John frequently could be found at intercollegiate football and basketball games. He also served on the Committee on University-ROTC Relationships. He was a communicant of St. Catherine of Siena Parish, where he served as an usher and in many other capacities for more than twenty years.

John is survived by his wife, Mary Ellen Zolper Cummings; his children, Michael, Daniel, Tara Cummings Zigarelli, Patrick, and Mary Anne; and by six grandchildren.

*Alexander deLahunta, Thomas J. Divers, Francis A. Kallfelz*