



James H. Gillespie

November 26, 1917 – January 10, 2011

James Howard Gillespie, V.M.D, was a graduate of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from the University of Pennsylvania in 1939. During World War II, he served as a Second Lieutenant in the Veterinary Corps of the U.S. Army, stationed primarily in Kunming, China. After intense and highly successful Army-style instruction in foreign language communication, he became able to communicate in Mandarin Chinese. When he completed his active military service, he was advanced to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Re-entering civilian life, he was appointed as a poultry pathologist on the faculty of the University of New Hampshire. In 1946, while serving in that position, he was recruited to the Avian Diseases Section of the Department of Pathology and Bacteriology in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University.

In 1950, Jim was appointed Assistant Director of a new Veterinary Virus Research Institute that was developed by its Director, Dr. J. Andrew Baker. The Institute, modeled after the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, from which Dr. Baker had come to Cornell (his alma mater for his D.V.M. and Ph.D. degrees), was a sub-unit of the Department of Pathology and Bacteriology in Cornell's Veterinary College.

That appointment gave Jim an opportunity to become involved in research on a number of virus diseases of domestic animals. Being well-disciplined, and having tireless, enthusiastic curiosity (but always a careful and patient researcher), he became an internationally well-recognized and appreciated contributor to the scientific literature. He was unquestionably one of Cornell University's most prolific and distinguished scholars.

Research in virus diseases depends heavily upon laboratory techniques that require quantitative methodology. The ability to adopt a variety of such techniques was a particularly strong asset for Jim. He often noted that he was very grateful for an earlier, exceptionally fine education in mathematics.

One of his most appreciated contributions for the management and immunization of dogs against canine distemper (a virus disease) was the development of an immunological nomogram for the assay of maternal immunity in neonatal puppies, a means for determining the best age for vaccination of newly-weaned puppies, to avoid vaccination failure.

His interest in quantitative immunoassays led him to a sabbatical leave in Holland where he became involved in research on foot-and-mouth disease (of cloven-footed animals), a devastating virus disease of animals like cattle, swine and sheep (a disease which we do not have in North America because of the vigilance of the United States Department of Agriculture). Later, he served for several years as Executive Secretary of the United States Delegation to a United States Argentine Joint Commission on Foot-and-Mouth-Disease, serving at the direct request of President John F. Kennedy of the United States, and President Arturo Frondizi of Argentina.

Dr. Gillespie trained several graduate students on virology and viral diseases of animals. In 1964, Dr. Gillespie moved from the Veterinary Virus Research Institute (present Baker Institute) to the Microbiology Department of the main campus at the College of Veterinary Medicine. The feline leukemia virus (FeLV) had just been identified; a large study on feline leukemia was begun at the College under the direction of Dr. Charles Rickard. Dr. Gillespie reasoned that if the FeLV was to be studied and understood, we better know about the other important viruses of the cat. He had several graduate students, as well as research associates and other faculty members, who studied various feline viruses and the diseases caused by these viruses.

Because of the outstanding training provided by Dr. Gillespie, many of his graduate students went on to distinguish themselves within the veterinary profession and the scientific community.

The concentration of studies led by Dr. Gillespie on infectious diseases of the cat was unique; since very little research was being done on the diseases of the cat prior to the mid-1960s-cats were just considered “small dogs.” These feline studies eventually led to the formation of the Cornell Feline Health Center in 1974 in order to improve the health and well-being of cats everywhere.

Dr. Gillespie was a leader in developing scientific information about vaccines for animals. He was a great communicator with his many colleagues throughout the world, and he brought these scientists together for several species-oriented symposia on the latest information about the infectious agents and the vaccines to prevent these agents from causing serious disease. He coordinated the publication of the proceedings of these symposia so that the veterinary clinicians would have the latest information to understand and control the many infectious diseases they dealt with on a daily basis. Jim had an abiding interest in sports, and was an enthusiastic tennis player. Further, he had an insatiable appetite for music, especially jazz. Upon the retirement of Dr. Dorsey W. Bruner as Chairman of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell, Dr. Gillespie was named to that position; a position from which he ultimately retired. During his stewardship therein, he was actively instrumental in the initiation and development of a strong research program at Cornell on infectious diseases of aquatic species of animals.

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