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DR. PHILIP HANDLER IS DEAD AT 64; EX-HEAD OF ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

By WALTER SULLIVAN

Dr. Philip Handler, who retired last June after 12 years as president of the National Academy of Sciences, died yesterday at New England Deaconess Hospital at the age of 64. He had been in the hospital since August. His death was attributed to cancer of the lymph system, complicated by pneumonia.

In his later years Dr. Handler became known for his efforts to make the academy an influential and impartial source of scientific advice and inspiration. He had previously acquired an international reputation for his research on the nutritional causes of disease.

Before he became president of the academy in 1969, Dr. Handler spent most of his academic career at Duke University in Durham, N.C., where he made a key discovery regarding pellagra, a disease that afflicted people in the Southeast living on a corn-rich diet.

Dr. Frank Press, who succeeded Dr. Handler as president of the academy, said his predecessor "transformed the academy from a sleepy, honorific body to one that performs a public service."

Articulate Spokesman for Science

Dr. Handler was chosen as president of the academy in part because of his ability to state the case for science before Congress and the public.

When Dr. Leland Haworth was director of the National Science Foundation in the 1960's, he said that the most articulate scientists he had met were Dr. Handler and Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who directed the atomic energy research project at Los Alamos, N.M., in World War II. Dr. Oppenheimer died in 1967.

Dr. Handler was born in New York City, the son of Jacob Handler and the former Lena Heisen. They lived for a time in Jersey City, then moved to Brooklyn, where his father owned real estate and gasoline stations.

He helped support himself by working as a gasoline station attendant while majoring in chemistry at the College of the City of New York. His interest in biochemistry was inspired by Benjamin Harrow, a City College professor.

Graduating at the age of 18, Dr. Handler shelved plans for a medical career to study biochemistry at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. He also worked at the United States Regional Industrial Byproducts Laboratory, where he obtained two patents for the production of plastics from soybeans in the 1930's. Linked Pellagra to Corn Diet

After earning his Ph.D. at the University of Illinois, he joined the Duke faculty in 1939 and became chairman of the department of biochemistry in 1950.

At Duke, Dr. Handler initially studied pellagra, a disfiguring disease that also degrades mental functions. He was able to trace its cause to corn-based diets. In response to his urging, North Carolina passed a law requiring that corn products be enriched in the vitamin.

He then found that high blood pressure associated with kidney disease was relieved by a low protein diet, although this reduced the production of a key hormone, ACTH, by the pituitary gland. In his biochemical research he was credited with discovering at least 15 enzymes, key chemicals that promote various biological processes.

At Duke in World War II, Dr. Handler devised a treatment for burns that was credited with saving the lives of many servicemen. After the war he headed a program of the Atomic Energy Commission that trained physicians in radiation medicine, and in 1950 performed a similar role with the Unitarian Service Committee Medical Mission to Japan. Testified on Capitol Hill

His research at Duke was supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health. Beginning in 1953, he appeared many times before Congressional committees to testify on behalf of the institutes' budget.

He also urged that the Institute of General Medical Sciences be created in the health organization to pursue basic medical research without the need for scientists to submit "contrived statements" in support of their efforts. His plan was accepted in 1963.

After 1962, when Dr. Handler was appointed to the National Science Board, his activities became increasingly concentrated in Washington. In 1966 he was elected chairman of the board, whose role is to supervise the National Science Foundation. He was re-elected chairman in 1968, and was elected president of the National Academy of Sciences a few months later.

From 1964 to 1967 he served on the President's Science Advisory Committee, and in 1964 became president of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology.

The National Academy of Sciences was chartered by Congress in 1863 to advise the Government on science and technology. Its membership of 1,300 is self-perpetuating by secret ballot. The academy, under Dr. Handler's two immediate predecessors, Dr. Detlev W. Bronk and Dr. Frederick Seitz, played an increasingly important role as science became more vital to the nation's economy and defense. Received Award From Reagan

Dr. Handler carried its activist role further. The academy and its research arm, the National Research Council, now issue about 300 reports a year. Panels and committees involved in such studies number about 9,000 specialists.

Some of their reports deal with delicate or controversial subjects, such as the dietary hazards of cholesterol or the role of Freons in depleting the protective ozone layer of the atmosphere.

Last October President Reagan awarded Dr. Handler the National Medal of Science, the nation's highest such award. He was viewed by his colleagues as gregarious and amiable. The journal Science said some of his colleagues reported that, in conducting meetings, he was "talented if somewhat loquacious."

Dr. Handler is survived by his wife, the former Lucille P. Marcus; two sons, Mark Handler of Durham and Erik Paul Handler of Greensboro, N.C.; a brother, Melvin, of New York City, and two grandchildren.

Illustrations: Photo of Dr. Philip Handler
