

# Courtney passes away after battle with esophageal cancer

Dr. Richard Courtney, former chair of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Distinguished Educator and Professor Emeritus, passed away Wednesday, April 11, following a brief battle with esophageal cancer.

Courtney was a highly esteemed and cherished leader, investigator and teacher at Penn State College of Medicine. He was recruited to the College of Medicine in 1991 as professor and chair, and retired in early 2012, touching so many lives during his 20 years here.

Colleagues described him as a generous and self-effacing man who, through his gentle demeanor, wise counsel and unwavering commitment to science and education, became a mentor to students and associates alike.

Prior to his arrival in Hershey, Courtney was professor and chair of the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Louisiana State University School of Medicine for six years, and was an associated professor at the University of Tennessee, Baylor College of Medicine. A virologist, he was most well-known for studying the herpes simplex virus, particularly the proteins found on the outside of the virus.



“When he started, no one knew much about the proteins on the outside of the virus – how big they were, how many they were. He was one of the first people to start asking questions,” said Dr. John Wills, professor of microbiology and immunology, and one of Courtney’s research collaborators. It was important to study what’s on the surface of the virus, Wills said, because these proteins are needed for the virus to infect and spread among cells and until scientists understand what’s there and how it works, they cannot form a strategy to defeat it.

He was perhaps most admired for his dedication to students. As word of his death spread through the College of Medicine last Thursday, one of the comments heard most often was how Courtney took time to educate and encourage students.

“I remember when graduate students were struggling with writing their dissertation thesis because it seemed too big a task to complete,” said Dr. Leslie Parent, vice dean for research and graduate studies. “He would tell them, ‘You don’t have to climb the mountain all at once. Just climb one step at a time, and step after step, you will get over that mountain.’ To encourage them, he would meet with them personally to help them through that journey.”

He was named a Penn State College of Medicine Distinguished Educator in 2009, and prior to that, was recognized by our medical students with their teaching awards seven times. The Department of Microbiology and Immunology created a student scholarship in his name.

Courtney is survived by his wife, Diana; daughters, Sheryl and Lisa; two sons-in-law; four grandchildren; and a sister. A celebration of his life will be held at 2 pm Friday, April 27, at Hoover Hunger Home, 88 Lucy Ave., Hershey.

Here are a few memories shared by his colleagues:

*“Shortly after he arrived in 1991, I became Associate Dean for Medical Education. As we were embarking on the transition from discipline-based, lecture format to problem-based, small group format learning in the medical school curriculum, Dick was one of several basic science department chairs who provide leadership and wise counsel along the way. His commitment to science and to education were unwavering, and we were very fortunate to have him as chair for over 20 years. As a fellow department chair for part of those 20 years, I valued his opinions and advice on many issues we shared, and we always celebrated our birthdays together on July 2! He was a good friend and colleague whom I will miss dearly.”* Dr. Robert Aber, professor and former chair of the Department of Medicine

*“Dr. Courtney was probably the most gracious, kind, fair and patient person I will ever know. He was always willing to help anyone that needed it, students, staff, faculty, or anyone else that would show up at his door. The passion he had for his work was evident, but also the passion for his friends and family. Everyone that had the pleasure of working for or knowing Dr. Courtney is a better person because of it.”* Billie Burns, grants and contracts administrator, Office of Research Affairs

*“On one of my recruitment visits, a badly delayed flight had me arriving at the airport at 4 am. I called Dick and insisted he not pick me, something he did for nearly all my trips to Hershey. As I was walking out of the terminal, I found Dick sitting in one of the rocking chairs. As always, he greeted me with the same warmth and energy as if I had flown in on time. He said that he was normally up at that time anyway. I learned that Dick was typically in his office at 5:30 am every day. Emblematic of his self-effacing nature, he said he did it just to snag the closest parking spot in the BMR lot.*

*On my first day at the College of Medicine, Dick and I went through a “handoff” of chair responsibilities for the department. He had composed a nearly 6-page long list of detailed information about every aspect of the department. We spent over two hours combing through each point, with Dick injecting key bits of detail that he wanted to make sure I took to heart. It was easy to see how incredibly, and rightfully, proud he was of the faculty, students, postdocs, and staff of the department he chaired for nearly 21 years.”* Aron Lukacher, chair, Department of Microbiology and Immunology

*“We were fortunate to have known Dr. Courtney for 41 years. While it is quite true that he was a very successful virologist and was highly sought as a reviewer of NIH grant proposals and journal manuscripts (his final review being written in December!), his greatest talent was serving as a department Chair. We say “serving” because he did not consider himself to be better than anyone else, regardless of their position within the department. He did not behave as King or Dictator, expecting others to do things for him. His primary concern was the success of everyone else the department, and he worked harder than anyone to make that possible (typically*

arriving at 5:00 AM and staying after most were gone). He most definitely had high expectations and was an eternal optimist who believed that each of us would succeed. And when we did, he refused to take any credit. But, he did not define success in terms of grant dollars and papers. He helped each person find how their talents could best be used. He viewed all of us as people and not just as a pieces of his department. He was an exceptionally talented listener who sincerely cared to understand what was on your mind and did not stand in your way as you spoke. Moreover, he sought out and respected the views of everyone, knowing that no matter how deeply and thoroughly he considered a problem, someone else might have a great idea that he had missed. We use to think Dr. Courtney should have written a "how to" book on being a leader, but what he did intuitively cannot be taught." John Wills and Rebecca Craven, professors, microbiology and immunology

*"Dick Courtney was a friend and a highly regarded colleague. I first met Dick in my capacity as head of the search committee for a Chair of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology. On his first visit, we had dinner at Au Jour Le Jour, a small restaurant in the Shipoke area of Harrisburg. During our discussion over dinner and fine wine, it became immediately apparent that Dick exemplified the expression "a gentleman and a scholar", and that we would indeed be fortunate to recruit a person of his caliber to the College of Medicine. During his recruitment, Dick was offered the opportunity to lead a combined department since Biochemistry and Molecular Biology was without a permanent Chair. He declined the offer demonstrating his strong commitment to the traditional structure of basic science departments in a college of medicine. Moreover, he convinced the Dean to initiate a national search for a Chair of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and subsequently became co-leader of the search.*

*Dick had a strong commitment to graduate student education, leading his departmental program to national recognition and establishing the foundation for a long-standing NIH funded training grant, one of only a few in the history of the College of Medicine. He was also committed to building graduate education and research across the University. We made many trips to University Park to participate in the planning stages of the Life Sciences Consortium that subsequently led to establishment of the Life Sciences Institute. Without fail, our return trips always included a stop at Meyer Dairy for ice cream, something we both enjoyed.*

*In the mid-1990s, Dick served on the Basic Science Committee for Faculty Compensation and Incentives. This was a task he took seriously and his contribution should certainly be remembered as part of his legacy. He and I spent many hours working together, often in the evenings, on a plan that eventually won the approval of the Dean and the University President. This effort, known as the "Research Incentive Plan" remains in effect today.*

*Dick was a wonderful friend with whom I enjoyed an occasional round of golf, a similar taste for single malt scotch, and lively conversation. He will certainly be missed." Leonard S. (Jim) Jefferson, Evan Pugh University Professor and chair emeritus*

*"I need not tell you what a truly wonderful person Dick Courtney was. He was a talented and very dedicated scientist, a wonderful and generous colleague, an outstanding teacher, and a supportive mentor to his students, postdocs, and young faculty. Both as Chairman of the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology here at LSUHSC (1985 – 1991) and later as*

*Chairman of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at Penn State University Medical Center (1991 to 2011), Dick used his leadership abilities, mentoring talents, and outstanding work ethic to build two excellent Departments and to contribute significantly and positively to the career development of thousands of graduate and medical students, postdocs, and junior faculty members. More importantly, Dick Courtney was a wonderful person in every regard. Dick was a devoted husband to Diana, a loving father to all members of his family, and a supportive colleague to all who knew Dick and interacted with him. It was very easy to admire and love a person such as Dick Courtney. He will be missed by all who knew him. Our lives were enriched to have had him as a colleague and a friend.”* Dennis J. O’Callaghan, Boyd Professor Emeritus, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center in a note to Dr. Courtney’s colleagues around the country

*“I, too, am deeply saddened by the news of Dick’s passing. Dick was instrumental and a very positive factor in recruiting me to Penn State College of Medicine, along with Jim Jefferson and Mac Evarts, in 1992. I came as chair of Biochemistry when Dick was a new chair of Microbiology, and we became ‘buddies’ at a time of growth and expansion of the College of Medicine. Dick was a great friend and supporter, and model of how to build a strong department. We shared many good memories over 20 years. He will, indeed, be missed.”* Judith S. Bond, professor emeritus

*“He had a gentle quietness about him that was really quite remarkable. I think what struck me most about him was how he could be a scientist, a department chair and a distinguished educator all at once, and he excelled at them all. During the first 7 or 8 years I was here, he was an informal mentor to me. During that time, he was chair of the academic progress committee that worked with students who had run into difficulties in their education. They would come in and share what had gone wrong, and I was always impressed by how calm and gentle and encouraging he would be. Taking in the entire picture of his career, I’d like to think I am modeling myself after him in some small way.”* Kent Vrana, chair, Department of Pharmacology

*“I had the good fortune to know Dick for all those 21 years as I also came to the College of Medicine in June 1991. What has stood out for me all these years knowing Dick are his gentleness, kindness, and professionalism. He always tried to do the right thing well and in a professional manner. He never lost his composure or his kindness even under adverse situations. It was always a great pleasure for me to chat with him in the hallway or at a meeting. I missed his presence at the college of Medicine after he retired. I wish Diana and the rest of the family that the beautiful moments and love they shared through the years will always remain in their memory and bring them some comfort at this challenging moment. Our deep condolences.”* Joanna Floros, Evan Pugh University Professor in Cellular and Molecular Physiology, Departments of Pediatrics, and Obstetrics and Gynecology,

*“This is extremely hard for me to put into words because I can honestly say I adored Dr. Courtney. He was the most humble man, who never focused on your title and treated everyone with the same level of kindness and respect. Even after his retirement we would meet for lunch to discuss our families and life. Of course, our sports rivalries also kept us entertained with multiple ice cream wagers, won and lost. I often told him he was one of my favorite people in the*

*whole world. It was an honor and privilege to work for him, even though he would say, 'You don't work for me, we work together.'*" Becky Yockey, financial manager, Graduate Education

*"One of our most memorable memories of Dick occurred when he was recruiting us in 2005/06. On our first trip to Hershey in December, an early winter snowstorm caused our connecting flight out of Cleveland to be canceled, and we were forced to spend the night there at an airport hotel. We made it to Hershey the next morning, and despite missing a few interviews the previous day our visit went well, and we were invited back for the all-important second visit in February. That visit also went well, but another winter storm was on the way; in fact, it had begun as we sat down with Dick for lunch at the Hershey Grill prior to leaving for the airport for our return trip to Memphis (where it only very rarely snows). After we ordered, Dick pulled out his notepad and as the snow was really starting to fly, he asked us what it would take to get the two of us to join his department. He then became very solemn, and said: but first, I ask that you be honest and up-front with me, and to please let me know where else you are considering. Given the answer, Clare and I looked at each other rather sheepishly, and then out at the now driving snow before telling him: The University of Florida. Dick's response was immediate and classic, as he let out a sharp moan, and if I remember correctly briefly put his face into his hands. We all had a good chuckle, and then he dutifully continued with writing down our comments, though we were never sure that he really gave it much chance at that point. Dick was a consummate recruiter and called us weekly until we agreed to come, one of the best decisions we ever made, and thereafter to see what else we needed. Dick was a fabulous chairman and a wonderful human being, and every member of the department was equally important in his eyes."* Jeffery T. Sample, and Clare E. Sample, professors of microbiology and immunology

*"Dr. Courtney was one of my favorite people at Penn State Hershey. When he entered a room, he had an instant calming influence. He was so intelligent, caring, thoughtful and competent; he had a way of putting people at ease while guiding you to a good outcome. I'm really sad to hear about his passing and I send my deepest sympathies to his family."* Rich Rauscher, adjunct/clinical assistant professor, Public Health Sciences

*"I had the unique experience of knowing Dr. Courtney as one of my medical school professors and later as his next door neighbor. In both settings, Dr. Courtney has made positive lasting impressions on me. My family and I will miss him dearly."* Jordan Newell

*"Even though he was also a consummate professional as an educator and administrator and remarkably productive in these aspects (he loved the word, aspects) as well, Dick would say "the science is the fun part." His science was methodical, careful, complete, and met the highest standards. Dick recognized how valuable good graduate students are. He took charge of the recruiting himself; it must have been extremely flattering to the candidates to have the Chair of the Department take such a personal role in their visit and subsequent decision.*

*As a leader, Dick always looked for and encouraged the best in others. He never managed down, always with. I rarely if at all heard him criticize someone personally – at most he would express his frustration with, or consternation at, another's actions. If he was sometimes unwilling to share responsibility, it was probably in large part because he didn't want others to have to do something he could do himself or for them to be bothered on his account. Dick was a gentleman:*

*he was gentle, kind, and earnest. He respected people. He was honest and straightforward.”*  
David Specter, professor emeritus.