

Obituary

Robert B. Dickson

Robert B. Dickson, PhD, the world-renowned breast cancer researcher, passed away Saturday, June 24th, 2006 at his home. Dr. Dickson was an outstanding researcher, educator, friend, colleague, mentor, and leader. His towering commitment to cancer research, especially breast cancer research, was an inspiration to all who had the privilege of working with him.



Bob Dickson, founding member of the BCO Editorial Board.

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In 1987 Dr. Dickson was the first person to discover how estrogens make breast cancer grow. He showed that estrogen action is involved in inducing certain growth factors, including tumor growth factors α and β , and fibroblast growth factors. In collaboration with Marc Lippman, MD, this work was published in *Science* and gave rise to an important new line of research into growth factors and their relationship with hormones in the progression of cancer. More recently, Dr. Dickson's work focused on identifying specific molecules in the invasion process and understanding how these molecules influence the extra-cellular matrix and surrounding cells. In 1999, Dr. Dickson and members of his laboratory discovered matrilysin, a transmembrane serine protease involved in angiogenesis and the progression of some epithelial cancers. While the original discovery was made in breast cancers, he also worked to understand its role in the progression of other diseases including cervical, ovarian, prostate, and thyroid cancers.

'Every cancer has its own Achilles' heel,' he told Georgetown University's *Blue & Gray*. 'And breast cancer's is a dependence on hormones and other growth factors.'

Dr. Dickson was a recognized authority on breast cancer, with encyclopedic knowledge of the relationship between hormones and growth factors in the development of the disease. He was the editor or co-author of 14 textbooks and journal issues on tumor growth factors, steroids, proteases, drugs, and breast cancer, and he was the author of more than 340 scientific publications over the course of his career. From the time he joined Georgetown in 1988, he maintained an unbroken record of significant NIH funding for breast cancer research.

Born and raised in the Washington, DC area, Dr. Dickson returned there after completing his undergraduate degree at the College of William and Mary and his doctorate in pharmacology at Yale University. From 1980 until 1988 Dr. Dickson worked at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) where he began his two-decade career in breast cancer research. In 1987 he became the first basic scientist to receive a tenured position in the Medicine Branch of the NCI.

After joining the Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center at Georgetown University, Dr. Dickson came into his own as a researcher and a leader. With a strong group of colleagues who had also moved from NCI, that included then-Lombardi director Dr. Lippman, Dr. Dickson helped build the cancer center into what it is today on the strength of his science, his hard work, and his compassion.

Dr. Dickson was also actively involved in the scientific community. He served on the editorial board of 11 journals including as an associate editor for *Cancer Research*. He served on 18 NIH and NCI study sections and review committees, as well as others for the American Cancer Society. He was a member of several government working groups and served on the advisory boards of six other institutions. Reflecting his international reputation, Dr. Dickson regularly presented at international symposia and was a member of the organizing committees for several meetings. He also participated in presentations at the Lombardi cancer clinic, explaining the latest advances in breast cancer research and answering questions for patients undergoing cancer treatment.

At Lombardi Dr. Dickson was the driving force behind the creation of the Tumor Biology doctorate program, which has now trained over 100 PhD students. He founded the Growth Regulation of Cancer program, which coordinates the study of molecular signaling processes that contribute to cancers. He served as Professor and Vice Chair of the Department of Oncology, and Associate Director for Basic Science and Education. Dr. Dickson was also co-director of the Lombardi Breast Cancer Program, the largest research program at the cancer center. In 2005 he was honored with the Cecilia Fisher Rudman Distinguished Professorship in Breast Cancer Research.

A prolific writer, excellent speaker, and outstanding mentor, Dr. Dickson is remembered around the world by his peers, collaborators, and former students. In addition to his extensive teaching responsibilities, he served as a mentor not only to students, post-doctoral fellows, and junior faculty, but also to many of his senior colleagues.

With a smile and the unchanging question, 'Is there anything you need from me today?' Dr. Dickson

walked the hallways of Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center. He offered his ear to everyone who needed his help, from the director to the students. He solved hundreds of problems, whether major or minor, related to his work or not. He could sit down with a colleague and from the results of just a few experiments, Dr. Dickson would envision an entire scientific paper or grant application.

'Bob Dickson is not the standard model of success, and yet he clearly was so successful,' said DR Claudine Isaacs, MD, co-director of the Breast Cancer Program at Lombardi. 'He was one of the 100 top cited breast cancer researchers, and yet he was humble. His mission was breast cancer, not himself.'

In 2001 Dr. Dickson and his wife, Jane Fall-Dickson, adopted a daughter. From that point on, Natasha became the center of his life. He went home on time every day to cook dinner and drove her to pre-school, and then elementary school, every morning. When she was young, he would come to work with three or four stickers stuck to the collar of his shirt, from Sponge Bob to the Little Mermaid, proudly wearing all day long the badges she had given him.

As a boy, Dr. Dickson was an Eagle Scout and developed an early interest in science. During his high school years he built a telescope as a science fair project, and maintained an interest in astronomy throughout his life. He often invited neighbors to view the night sky through a telescope at his home in Kensington, Maryland. His other interests included offshore diving which he practiced nearly every year during trips to the Caribbean, archeology, and Shakespearean drama.

Dr. Dickson is survived by his wife of 14 years, Jane M. Fall-Dickson, and daughter, Natasha Fall-Dickson, both of Kensington; his parents, Robert R. and Marie Dickson of Fairfax City; and a brother.

The Dickson family created the Robert B. Dickson Memorial Fund at Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center to support future generations of breast cancer researchers through scholarship.