

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS RONALD HAROLD LAESSIG

Ronald (Ron) H. Laessig, professor emeritus in the Department of Population Health Sciences and retired professor from the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, died in his sleep on March 29, 2009 at the age of 68. Dr. Laessig spent his entire professional career at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and retired in 2007 after being appointed director emeritus of the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene (WSLH). He was born in Marshfield, Wisconsin in 1940 and received his undergraduate degree in chemistry from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in 1962. Ron earned his PhD in analytic chemistry in 1965 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He left Wisconsin briefly to obtain postdoctoral training in electrochemistry at Princeton University and in clinical chemistry at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. He returned to the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1966 as an assistant professor in preventive medicine and chief of clinical chemistry at the WSLH. He was promoted to associate professor and assistant director of the WSLH in 1970. His academic career continued with his promotion to professor in the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine in 1978 and his appointment as WSLH director in 1980. That post he held until his retirement in 2007. Although Ron had retired, he continued to work on special projects at the WSLH as director emeritus until the day of his death.

Dr. Laessig was a Wisconsin patriot with over 40 years of service to the state and the university. He fully embodied the "Wisconsin Idea," as his work reached every day beyond the parochial boundaries of the campus to every corner of the state. He profoundly loved the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and he would occasionally lead others in a robust rendition of "On Wisconsin." Following graduate training, he returned to Wisconsin and became a life-long champion of public health. He directed the WSLH, Wisconsin's public health and environmental health laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for 27 years during which he also participated in scholarly activities on campus, nationally and internationally. Under his leadership, the scope and size of the WSLH increased fourfold. At the end of his directorship, the WSLH had a staff of 350 and a 40-million-dollar annual budget, and provided laboratory services to Wisconsin state agencies, local public health departments, hundreds of Wisconsin hospitals and clinics, a dozen federal agencies, as well of many firms and organizations across the nation. Throughout his distinguished career, the WSLH became a pre-eminent state laboratory with an aggressive research agenda and academic mission.

Dr. Laessig was known and loved across the campus, throughout the state and among his peers within many national associations and societies to which he belonged. His professional credentials included active membership in a dozen national organizations in which he played prominent leadership roles. Ron frequently served in leadership positions on committees of the National Committee for Clinical Laboratory Standards (NCCLS), the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI), the American Association of Clinical Chemists (AACC), the American Public Health Association and the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL). He served as chair of many professional symposiums and on the editorial boards of many scientific journals. He served as chair of the Wisconsin Public Health Executive Committee and on the Board of Scientific Counselors for the National Center for Environmental Health at CDC. Dr. Laessig received the APHL lifetime achievement award for his exceptional service as a renowned scientist, leader, mentor and friend.

Clinical chemistry was Dr. Laessig's life work. He broadened his focus to become a national leader in multiphasic health screening, clinical laboratory education, quality assurance practices associated with the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments of 1988, environmental health and newborn screening.

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Under Ron's vision and guidance, one of the first newborn screening programs was established in Wisconsin in 1966. He introduced screening for phenylketonuria (PKU), a serious inherited metabolic condition that can be identified in infants and treated with a reduced phenylalanine diet. Over the years, newborn screening was expanded to include more than 45 conditions, some of which include congenital hypothyroidism, galactosemia, cystic fibrosis, sickle cell disorders, and severe combined immunodeficiency (SCID). Dr. Laessig was very passionate about having the WSLH be a preeminent newborn screening laboratory with a role-model follow-up program engaging volunteer clinical consultants throughout Wisconsin. After the WSLH became one of the first newborn screening labs to implement a shift from biochemical markers to molecular screening, he concluded his research with one of his finest accomplishments, the establishment of the first population-based newborn screening program in the world for SCID. Screening all infants born in Wisconsin for SCID began in January 2008. Based on the efforts initiated by Ron and his colleagues at the WSLH, a national recommendation to screen all babies born in the United States for SCID has been endorsed by federal agencies and professional pediatric and genetic societies. In the last months of his life, Ron and his colleagues at the WSLH submitted for publication two papers that described screening newborns for SCID.

Dr. Laessig oversaw the building of a new environmental, occupational and forensic toxicology laboratory for the WSLH in 1996, and he actively participated in the planning for a new co-located lab with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), which is scheduled for completion in June 2013. His commitment to laboratory quality was also reflected in his establishment of the proficiency testing program at WSLH. That program is one of the few federally approved programs that provide proficiency testing services to thousands of hospitals, clinics and specialty laboratories across the nation. Under Dr. Laessig's leadership, the WSLH became a regional center for biological, chemical and radiological terrorism testing and response, as well as a national leader in influenza pandemic planning and testing. The WSLH was referred to by former Governor Doyle as the "CDC of the North."

Dr. Laessig published more than 200 scientific publications on practical topics ranging from laboratory accreditation, quality performance, proficiency testing, good laboratory practices and newborn screening. In addition, he contributed to a dozen book chapters on clinical testing. He enjoyed sharing his scientific expertise at international meetings in Germany, Italy, England, Switzerland, Japan, France, Ireland, Canada and Belgium, and then sharing his travel experiences with anyone who would listen. He loved building an addition to his home, woodworking in his spare time, and enjoyed showing and sharing his accomplishments with friends and family. He also enjoyed quiet walks along the Capital Bike Trail where he often stopped to chat with friends and plan research. His enthusiasm and energy for work and life contributed to his devotion to employees of the WSLH and his love of his family.

He is survived by his wife of 42 years, Joan; daughter Betsy (Scott) Laessig-Stary; and his three beloved grandchildren: Samantha, Tristan and Alexander Stary.

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