

In Memoriam: Sigmund S. Socransky, DDS



Dr Sig Socransky passed away unexpectedly on August 27, 2011. Few scholars and even fewer individuals could change how we understand an area of science in an apolitical fashion. One wonders as to the makeup of those individuals who seek answers to questions only they seem to ask. Dr Socransky and his colleagues revolutionized our understanding of oral microbiology with a focus on the etiology and treatment of periodontal infections.

Sig graduated as valedictorian from the University of Toronto in 1957. The research track appealed to him, and he continued his education at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. While there, he was advised to complete training in periodontology during a time in which the theoretical models of periodontics had not completely incorporated the infectious nature of these diseases. He simultaneously became a research fellow in bacteriology at the Forsyth Institute.

Sig had the imagination to ask the right research questions and perform the appropriate studies. His intellect allowed him to envisage the needs of his research and develop the laboratory skills to implement new technologies. Research, however, is a laborious, often frustrating endeavor with answers sometimes taking many years to become evident. His humor and decorum combined with great patience enabled him to persevere through decades of work, which resulted in an understanding of bacterial complexes and biofilms related to periodontal diseases.

Dr Socransky was a senior member of the staff and chairman of the Department of Periodontology at the Forsyth Institute as well as professor of periodontology at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. During his 54 years of research, he trained many domestic and international students, who in turn have made significant contributions to oral health. He published over 280 scientific articles and 270 abstracts. These publications have helped unlock the mysteries of the bacteria that cause periodontal diseases and have provided descriptions of the microbial composition of supra- and subgingival plaque, the classification of the resident plaque bacteria, and the delineation of pathogenic and host-compatible species. One of Sig's favorite expressions was, "They said it couldn't be done, but we fooled them and did it anyway." His research was recognized by others, and Sig was awarded some of the highest honors including the Orban and William Gies Awards from the American Academy of Periodontology, the Norton M. Ross Award for excellence in clinical research from the ADA, the Yngve Ericsson Award for Preventive Dentistry from the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, and the Jerome and Dorothy Schweitzer Award from the Greater New York Academy of Prosthodontics.

Despite the many hours spent in the research laboratory or at the computer, he and his wife, June, shared a private life for 48 years. They enjoyed their home at the base of Mount Washington and could be seen trekking the many trails there. Sig Socransky loved life and was perhaps the most giving person to be found. He was too young to leave us with so many questions about science and life still to be answered. One could not have had a better mentor, friend, and life coach. We will miss him profoundly.

Kenneth Malament, DDS, MScD