Should Dermatology Be Celebrating Albert M. Kligman?

By Norman M. Goldfarb

In 2007, the Society for Investigative Dermatology (SID) established the annual Albert M. Kligman/Phillip Frost Leadership Lecture and Award. According to the original solicitation for nominees, “The award is made possible by the generosity of Dr. Phillip Frost and will be presented to an individual in acknowledgement of significant contributions to the understanding of structure and function of skin, preferably in the past five years. A $25,000 honorarium accompanies the award.”

Phillip Frost, MD, (1935-) has served as Professor of Dermatology at the School of Medicine, University of Miami; Chairman of the Department of Dermatology at Mt. Sinai Medical Center of Greater Miami; Chairman of the Board of Directors of Key Pharmaceuticals; and Chairman of the Board of Directors and Chief Executive Officer of Ivax Corporation, among other accomplishments. Dr. Frost worked as a resident under Dr. Kligman at Holmesburg Prison.

Albert M. Kligman, MD (1916-2010) was a figure of great controversy. On one hand, he made major contributions to the field of dermatology, especially related to the use of tretinoin (Retin-A) to treat acne and wrinkles. On the other hand, his grossly unethical research on prisoners at Holmesburg Prison made him the most notorious violator of clinical research ethics in U.S. history. Prior to that, he conducted actively harmful studies on children with intellectually disabilities at the State Colonies for the Feebleminded in Vineland and Woodbine, New Jersey. While Dr. Kligman was hardly alone in blatantly violating fundamental human rights, other clinical research atrocities are known by their location (e.g., Tuskegee) or their victim (e.g., Jesse Gelsinger). Only experts can name the investigators responsible for these other scandals.

Six distinguished leaders in the field of dermatology have won the award created in Dr. Kligman’s name:

- **Jouni J. Uitto**, MD, PhD, Chairman, Department of Dermatology & Cutaneous Biology, Thomas Jefferson University Medical College (2008)
- **Stephen I. Katz**, MD, PhD, Director, National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, National Institutes of Health (2009)
- **John R. Stanley**, MD, Professor of Dermatology, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine (2010)
- **Peter Elias**, MD, Professor of Dermatology, University of California, San Francisco (2011)
- **Robert Lavker**, PhD, Professor in Dermatology, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine (2012)
- **Elaine Fuchs**, PhD, Head of the Laboratory of Mammalian Cell Biology and Development, The Rockefeller University (2013)

While winning the award is prestigious, the winners have also lent their prestige to the award, implicitly endorsing Dr. Kligman, despite the very dark side of his career.

A search of the SID’s website (http://www.sidnet.org) reveals no mention of the award. The author provided the SID and the award winners a copy of this article. The SID did not respond. Only one recipient responded to a request for comment. He raised three important issues (with the author’s paraphrasing and responses, based on the references sited below):
• Where was Dr. Kligman’s research on the continuum of ethical/unethical conduct? Was it in a “gray zone”?
  Much of Dr. Kligman’s research was clearly unethical and well out of any “gray zone.”

• Was Dr. Kligman working for the “greater good” or personal financial gain?
  It is impossible to know Dr. Kligman’s intentions, but many of his experiments were actively harmful to vulnerable study subjects and scientifically unsound. He was very well remunerated for his work.

• Was Dr. Kligman’s research acceptable under the less-stringent ethical standards of the time?
  Dr. Kligman’s research was clearly unethical under the standards of the times, well after publication of the Nuremberg Code. Also, it is today’s standards that are relevant to an award offered today. Nobody would support a new award named after the Tuskegee Syphilis Study investigators, and they certainly thought their work was justified by “the greater good.”

Apparently, SID can celebrate Dr. Kligman’s contributions, secure in the knowledge that even distinguished leaders in the field of dermatology do not appreciate the ethical issues related to Dr. Kligman.

References


“Against Their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation on Children in Cold War America,” Allen M. Hornblum, 2013.


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