Emil “Tom” Frei III, M.D.

Emil “Tom” Frei III, M.D., AACR past-president (1971-1972) and a member for 54 years, died on April 30 at the age of 89. Frei, who revolutionized the treatment of cancer by demonstrating that multidrug chemotherapy could be effective for previously incurable cancers, was physician-in-chief emeritus and former director of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and the Richard and Susan Smith distinguished professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Mass.

A pioneer in the development of combination chemotherapy, Frei’s work is recognized as the foundation for most modern cancer therapies and as one of the most important advances in cancer treatment.

Frei was a very active member of the AACR, of which he first became a member in 1959. In addition to serving as president, he was a member of the Massachusetts State Legislature Committee (1998-2000) and the Scientific Review Panel (1998-1999). Frei was recently inaugurated into the first class of the Fellows of the AACR Academy at the AACR Annual Meeting 2013. He also was recognized for his significant and fundamental contributions to cancer research with the first AACR Award for Lifetime Achievement in Cancer Research in 2004.

The research conducted by Frei and his colleagues established that treatment with multiple chemotherapy agents could produce lasting remissions in children with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. This approach increased the cure rate for childhood acute lymphoblastic leukemia from nearly zero in 1955 to more than 80 percent, which it is today. This work also led to successful treatments for certain other forms of childhood leukemia, several forms of lymphoma, testicular and other cancers, as well as successful postsurgical chemotherapeutic protocols for patients with breast and colon cancers and osteosarcoma.

Born on Feb. 21, 1924, in St. Louis, Mo., Frei served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and then received his bachelor’s degree from Colgate University in 1944 and his medical degree from Yale University in 1948. He served in the U.S. Navy Medical Corps in Korea from 1950 to 1952 and then completed his residency at St. Louis University Hospital in Missouri. From 1955 to 1966, Frei was chief of the Leukemia Section and the Medicine Branch at the National Cancer Institute. He then worked at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center until 1972, when he began serving as physician-in-chief at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, a position he held until 1991.

Frei has received numerous other honors in recognition of his significant work, including the Albert Lasker Clinical Medical Research Award; the General...
Motors Charles F. Kettering Award; the Hamao Umezawa Award from the International Society of Chemotherapy, Infection and Cancer; the Armand Hammer Award; and the First National Institutes of Health Distinguished Alumni Award. He was an elected member of the Institute of Medicine and a fellow of the American College of Physicians and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Frei was also one of the founders of the Cancer and Leukemia Group B research group and served as president of the American Society of Clinical Oncology.