George K. Smelser, 1908-1973

George K. Smelser (Dec. 14, 1908-Dec. 22, 1973) was energetically involved in his many-faceted pursuits and responsibilities until his death following a heart attack on Dec. 22, 1973. The impact of this tragic event spread far beyond his immediate family, for he was held in the highest esteem and was loved by many close co-workers and friends throughout the world who remember his devotion to excellence in his work, his infectious enthusiasm, and his genuine concern for the welfare of others. In a rare manner, he combined modesty, simplicity of life style, and a limitless drive to help others with a deep-rooted and absorbing fascination with biological research.

He was meticulous in observing the accepted norms of etiquette in his relationships with others. Beneath this formal correctness was an uncompromising dedication, a quiet sense of humor, and a genuine warmth that shone through the forms. He was a happy man who loved nature and life with his family. I remember him vividly as a young investigator at Woods Hole in 1942. He had helped to organize our Summer work there and had managed, in those marine surroundings, to arrange housing for a number of rabbits for which he personally provided care, with characteristic kindness. We walked on many evenings with his beloved wife and little daughter in the fragrance of the blooming honeysuckle, as he patiently explained to his child the nature of the wonderful seaside creatures she had unearthed.

Dr. Smelser liked to travel and see the world, particularly when he could be in the company of his wife, co-workers, and students. In 1962, on the occasion of the International Congress at New Delhi, he climbed to the top of a high building near the caves of Ajanta and Ellora with a speed and exuberance which expressed the energy and vigor he brought to all of his activities, and how effectively he had overcome a previous illness.

In the midst of the Great Depression, Dr. Smelser’s life-work set roots in the University of Chicago, where he was awarded the Ph.D. degree in 1932; in the laboratories of F. H. A. Marshall and John Mammond at the University of Cambridge; and in an apprenticeship with P. W. Smith at Columbia University. His first appointment at Columbia University was in the Department of Anatomy with, significantly, an assignment to the Department of Ophthalmology. His published work not only contributed to anatomy, endocrinology, developmental biology, and ophthalmology, but also forged strong links among these disciplines.

After earlier studies of the hormonal control of sexual differentiation and lactation, Dr. Smelser quickly focused on an analysis of the biological basis of exophthalmos, elucidating the relationships between thyroidal function and the behavior of orbital fat. Still later, he turned his attention to the development and function of the cornea. Save for one brief use of avian embryos, he employed a wide range of mammalian species for his studies, applying to them the newer techniques that developed during his career. The co-authorships of publications arising from these efforts reflect the large number of investigators with whom he collaborated and interacted. Altogether, 120 publications bear his name. His ability to elicit and
sustain the dedication of others is beautifully reflected in his long and productive partnership in science with Miss Victoria Ozanics, who still carries forward some of the work they set afoot together.

His role as interdisciplinary catalyst went beyond laboratory activities, for he gave continuously of his talent and energy to the several fields and societies which he had espoused, and in service on a number of federal and private advisory committees. During the exciting intensification of scientific endeavor during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s he played a discerning and effective role in identifying and encouraging promising young investigators. His laboratory attracted many students, not only because of the quality of the work he performed and directed, but also for the generosity with which he gave time, attention, and advice to developing investigators. His influence was also felt at a number of other institutions. At least once in the exercise of current duties, he made a special visit to urge a younger investigator to request expanded support for his work, an event recalled in the present climate with poignancy and nostalgia.

George Smelser’s mastery of English, his highly developed powers of rigorous logic, and his familiarity with the subject matter of his field were well applied in several important pursuits. He served on the editorial boards of five journals, in addition to editing a collection of important papers, “The Structure of the Eye.” Whether he spoke privately or publicly, extemporaneously or more formally, listeners were impressed by his polished diction, lucid phrasing, and sound organization. Annually, between 1965 and his death, he presented lectures and demonstrations as a Consultant and Visiting Professor in the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Puerto Rico, covering ocular structure and development in breadth and depth. This virtuoso performance required five hours daily for a period of seven days. His use of yet another medium of communication in his film “Embryology of the Eye” earned the Award of Merit from the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology.

The solid accomplishments that flowed from Dr. Smelser’s use of his talents and abilities were recognized by a number of honors and by a progressive increase in the responsibilities entrusted to him. He was elected a member of the Harvey Society, made an Honorary Fellow of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology, presented with the Proctor Medal by the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology, selected to present the eighteenth Jackson Memorial Lecture before the Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology, awarded a Research Career Professorship by the National Institutes of Health, invited as Honorary Lecturer in Ophthalmology by the Johns Hopkins Hospital and, in 1969, appointed Malcolm P. Aldrich Professor in Ophthalmology at Columbia University.

In the depths of distress in which his family and friends find themselves, there are a few consoling thoughts, among which may be included the permanence of his accomplishments in research and in the development of a large and successful Ophthalmology Research Department. But more significantly, we will not forget that he achieved these goals without sacrificing his kindness to and consideration of others.

Alfred J. Coulombre
Ludwig von Sallmann

Curriculum vitae

Dr. Smelser was born in Anderson, Ind., Dec. 14, 1908, and died in New York City, Dec. 22, 1973. He received his Ph.D. in 1932 at the University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.

Teaching and research positions included:

1969-present Endowed Chair: Malcolm P. Aldrich Research Professor in Ophthalmology.

1965-present Consultant and Visiting Professor, Department of Ophthalmology, University of Puerto Rico, San Juan, P. R.
1964  Honorary Lecturer in Ophthalmology, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, Md.

1963-present  Research Career Professorship Award from National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md.


1950  Honorary Fellow, American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otalaryngology.

1946-1955  Associate Professor in Anatomy, Assigned to Ophthalmology, Columbia University, New York, N. Y.

1939-1946  Assistant Professor in Anatomy, Assigned to Ophthalmology, Columbia University, New York, N. Y.

1938-1939  Associate in Anatomy, Assigned to Ophthalmology, Columbia University, New York, N. Y.

1934-1938  Instructor in Anatomy, Assigned to Ophthalmology, Columbia University, New York, N. Y.

1933-1934  National Research Council Fellow at Columbia University, with Professor P. E. Smith.


1950  Received an Award of Merit for his film "Embryology of the Eye" from the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otalaryngology.

Received a seat in the Faculty of Medicine, July 1, 1958.

Was a member of the Sensory Diseases Study Section, National Institutes of Health from 1952.


Chairman and Trustee for the Association for Research in Ophthalmology—1967.


Member, Scientific Advisory Committee Fight for Sight—1969-present.

Member of Corneal Research Task Force, National Institutes of Health—1972.

Vice-Chairman of International Committee for Eye Research.

Consultant to the National Council to Combat Blindness, Inc.


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