



THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE
Harvard University

Emil “Tom” Frei, III



Dr. Emil Frei was the Richard and Susan Smith Distinguished Professor of Medicine at the Harvard Medical School and the Director and Physician-in-Chief at what is now known as the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

Dr. Frei, who was known as Tom, was raised in St. Louis, Missouri where his family, who had emigrated from Germany, owned a stained glass business. Tom received his undergraduate degree from Colgate University in 1944, graduated from the Yale University School of Medicine in 1948, and served his medical residency at St. Louis University Hospital. His medical training was interrupted for two years during which he served in the Navy during the Korean War.

In 1955, he was recruited as a clinical investigator to the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland when his mentor in St. Louis, Dr. Gordon Zubrod, was named Clinical Director of that institution. Working with his close colleague, Dr. Emil Freireich, Tom began a series of clinical and laboratory studies which opened the door to curing acute lymphocytic leukemia in children. He initiated the use of clinical protocols that explored

the value of combining different cytotoxic drugs into combination chemotherapy regimens. His team further introduced the practice of administering platelet transfusions to reduce the risk of fatal bleeding in bone marrow-suppressed children and the importance of intensive antibiotic therapy in the presence of neutropenia. These principles inspired other investigators at the National Cancer Institute to pursue combination chemotherapy in the management of malignant lymphomas and such solid tumors as breast cancer.

Tom was one of the founders of a major cancer cooperative group – the Acute Leukemia Group B which later evolved into the Cancer and Leukemia Group B, serving as the Group Chair for 16 years from 1956 to 1963 and again from 1981 to 1990. He was an active member of the team of physicians and lay persons whose testimony led to passage of the National Cancer Act in 1971. In 1972, Tom received the

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

Lasker-DeBakey Clinical Medical Research Award from the Lasker Foundation “for his outstanding contribution in application of the concept of combination chemotherapy for lymphoma and acute adult leukemia”. He served as President of the American Society of Clinical Oncology, President of the American Association of Cancer Research, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Science, a founding member of the Medical Oncology Subspecialty Board of the American Board of Internal Medicine, and a recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Association for Cancer Research.

Tom’s career was distinguished by leadership roles at the National Cancer Institute from 1955 to 1965, at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston from 1965 to 1972 where he was the founding director of the Department of Developmental Therapeutics, and as Physician-in-Chief at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute at Harvard Medical School from 1972 until 1991.

Tall and lanky, Tom was characteristically upbeat, always finding “the positives” in an emerging discipline which many non-oncologists otherwise found to be depressing. He was an inspirational pioneer and leader in cancer medicine, having trained several generations of subsequent leaders in medical oncology, co-edited the first textbook, entitled Cancer Medicine, with Dr. James Holland, thereby providing a comprehensive description of the oncology field, and was instrumental in the designation of medical oncology as a subspecialty of internal medicine. Under his leadership, the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute’s medical and research staff grew to where it now ranks as one of the foremost cancer research centers in the world. That fact, the now internationally respected subspecialty of medical oncology, and the first demonstration of effective combination chemotherapy are his foremost legacies.

Tom died from complications of Parkinson’s disease in 2013 at the age of 89.

Respectfully submitted,

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