Stefan S. Fajans, M.D. ~ 1918-2014

Dr. Stefan Fajans, Active Professor Emeritus of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan's Division of Metabolism, Endocrinology & Diabetes (MEND), was an international leader in the study and treatment of diabetes. Dr. Fajans' long and impressive career spanned over seven decades. Even after being officially retired for 25 years, he still played an active role in the MEND Division by continuing his important research.

Fajans, who had always been interested in medicine, enrolled in the University of Michigan's chemistry program as an undergraduate. He received his bachelor's degree in chemistry in just two years. Thereafter, Fajans entered the University of Michigan Medical School. He soon became interested in endocrinology and, more specifically, in the control of carbohydrate metabolism. During his junior year, he took an elective in endocrinology that was taught by Dr. Jerome Conn, then the chief of the Endocrinology and Metabolism Division. Fajans' career in the study and treatment of endocrinology, metabolism, and diabetes was set in motion.

Upon graduation from medical school in 1942, Fajans completed an internship at New York's prestigious Mount Sinai Hospital. In 1943, he was drafted into the U.S. Army Medical Corps during World War II. He was assigned to an evacuation hospital, which was the first to arrive on Omaha Beach on the third day of the Normandy invasion (D-Day plus 3).

Following the end of the war, Fajans returned to the University of Michigan as a research assistant under the guidance of Dr. Conn until 1947. He went on to finish his medical residency in 1949, his fellowship in endocrinology and metabolism in 1951, and then accepted an assistant professorship position in that division. From then on, Fajans has devoted his life to endocrinology and to diabetes research and care.

In 1958, Fajans began studying a Michigan family with more than 360 members now spanning seven generations. That family, which became known as the "R-W pedigree," had an astonishing 74 members with a form of non-insulin-dependent diabetes. However, the disease appeared unusually early in this family — diagnosed in children and adolescents, unlike the usual onset of type 2 diabetes after age 40. The study of this family, as well as others, led Fajans to name this form of diabetes as Maturity Onset Diabetes of the Young in 1964, abbreviated as MODY. This form of diabetes is inherited in an autosomal dominant fashion, meaning that the disease appears in approximately 50 percent of each successive generation and is due to a mutation of a single gene.

During the late 1980s, Fajans began collaborating with Graeme Bell, Ph.D., Louis Block Professor of Biochemistry & Molecular Biology and Medicine at the University of Chicago. Fajans co-published the first paper describing a genetic marker of MODY in 1991. In 1996, Bell and his colleagues found the MODY gene for the R-W pedigree, designated as MODY 1, and a related gene for MODY 3. Until his passing at the age of 96 in 2014, Fajans continued to study the R-W pedigree, as well as families with MODY 2, MODY 3, and MODY 4. In the August 2011 issue of *Diabetes Care*, Fajans published a review with Graeme Bell as co-author. The paper explores MODY and its history, genetics, pathophysiology, and clinical decision-making. Today, genetic testing for MODY is routine and can affect correct diagnosis and treatment.

Aside from his research, Fajans was active as the chief of the Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism and as a teacher and practicing clinician. He was instrumental in establishing the Michigan Diabetes Research and Training Center (MDRTC) at the University of Michigan in 1977. Fajans lectured in and received awards from many countries on all continents. He was president of the American Diabetes Association, 1971–1972, and vice president of the Endocrine Society the preceding year. He gave the Banting Memorial Lecture in the USA, Canada, and Great Britain. In 1984, Fajans was named the Russell Lecturer, the most prestigious research award given by the University of Michigan. In addition, he is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences.

Fajans was also a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. He and his wife Ruth, a U-M alumna and former biochemist, were married for 64 years (deceased 2012) and have two sons and three grandchildren.