The cancer research community suffered an enormous loss with the death of Dr. Dimitrios Trichopoulos on December 1, 2014, at the age of 75. Dimitrios was the Vincent L. Gregory Professor of Cancer Prevention and Professor of Cancer Epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health (now the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health), and a past chair of Epidemiology at the School. He was an outstanding scientist, mentor, and teacher for more than four decades in the field of cancer epidemiology and prevention.

Dimitrios was a trailblazer in cancer research and published more than 1,000 scientific papers. His seminal work included several significant “first in field” studies. He was first, with a hypothesis paper in 1990 in The Lancet, to propose the role of the in utero environment and breast cancer risk. He was first in 1981, along with an independent paper published a few days later, to show the association between secondhand cigarette smoke and increased risk of lung cancer. He provided compelling epidemiological evidence for the associations of hepatitis B virus and tobacco smoking with an increased risk of primary liver cancer. Outside of the field of cancer, his paper in The Lancet linking psychological stress to an increased risk of cardiovascular death after the 1981 earthquake in Athens, Greece, was included in a Core Canon of medical literature published by The Lancet of 27 papers that every health professional should read.

David Hunter, Dean for Academic Affairs at the School, wrote: “Dimitrios remarkably retained his creativity and work ethic until the end of his life. Just three weeks ago he was here in Boston pushing the work forward and radiating enthusiasm as always.”

A native of Greece, Dimitrios studied at the University of Athens Medical School, where he earned an M.D. in 1963 and a Ph.D. in 1971. He earned an S.M. at Harvard School of Public Health in 1968 and held several teaching appointments at the school over the next four decades. Dimitrios was appointed full professor of Epidemiology in 1989 and took on the role of chair that same year, serving until 1996. In 1993, he was named the Vincent L. Gregory Professor of Cancer Prevention at Harvard, and also began a four-year appointment as director of the Harvard Center for Cancer Prevention.

Dimitrios was a Member of the Academy and President of the Hellenic Health Foundation in Greece. He held teaching appointments at the University of Athens Medical School and the Karolinska Institute in Sweden. His awards and distinctions are many and include honorary doctorates, the Brinker International Award for Breast Cancer Clinical Research, the Harvard School of Public Health’s Julius Richmond Award, and Alumni Award of Merit, and the Medal of Honor of the International Agency for Research on Cancer, World Health Organization.

Dimitrios played a powerful role in teaching, mentoring, and inspiring students across the globe. “He urged us to strive for keeping on the cutting edge of methodologies and for understanding the biologic basis of the epidemiological findings,” said Chung-Cheng Hsieh, Adjunct Professor of Epidemiology at Harvard and Professor of Cancer Biology, University of Massachusetts Medical School. “We learned by observing and experiencing his passion in epidemiologic studies of disease etiology. He was also a dear friend who never failed to check on the well being of our family. He was the best mentor one could have.”

“Dimitrios was indeed a giant among giants in the field of epidemiology,” said Michelle Williams, chair of Harvard’s Department of Epidemiology and Stephen B. Kay Family Professor of Public Health. “He will be remembered most for his generosity, sincerity, and his enduring commitment to teaching and mentoring legions of students and junior faculty from across the globe.”

Lorelei Mucci, an Associate Professor of Epidemiology at Harvard, wrote: “Dimitrios was one of the most spectacular people I have ever met. He was an innovator in cancer research, an outstanding intellect, a magnumisnous mentor, a brilliant teacher, and a generous friend. Spending an hour with Dimitrios in the classroom or in his office was like having the universe opened to you with all of its possibilities. He was a teacher and mentor to literally thousands of cancer researchers around the globe, and his legacy will be for us to carry forward his memory, his passion for scientific discovery, and his generosity of spirit.”

Dimitrios is survived by his wife Antonia Trichopoulos, and colleagues, students, and friends from around the world, as well as their children for whom Dimitrios held a special place in his heart.
Dimitrios Trichopoulos: In Memoriam (1938–2014)

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