Dear Editor,

One year ago it was with anxiety and sadness that many friends and I received news of the recently fatal illness of Dr. Stan Korsmeyer. In the ensuing months he and his family have suffered greatly. It is a truly vexing irony that Stan should have succumbed to one of a family of illnesses that he has studied for more than two decades and led pioneering laboratory breakthroughs in our understanding of some forms of cancer.

For generations cancer was viewed as beginning in one cell that somehow started to divide rapidly and wildly leading to a detectable malignant tumor, which might then be treated. Most chemotherapeutic drugs are imperfectly effective because they impede this cell growth and division. Stan literally turned this view of cancer on its head when in the early 1980's he clearly demonstrated that a form of blood cell cancer developed not because of uncontrolled cell division- but rather that these abnormal, malignant cells did not die in the expected, normal fashion. They grew to become recognizable tumors because they did not follow the usual sequence of programmed cell death.

Further investigations by Stan and others have demonstrated that the principle of programmed cell death operates in all animals, and to great astonishment involves the same set of regulatory genes and proteins in a bewildering but increasingly understood sequence of interactions in each of the many animals studied- be they worms, flies or mammals. These findings have opened the door to our understanding of the relationship of the normal processes of life and how they may fail with disastrous consequences.

For his part in these investigations Stan received many awards including in 1995 his election to the National Academy of Sciences while he was the Chief of the Division of Molecular Oncology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. In 1998 he joined the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston and served as Chairman of the Executive Committee for Research. To achieve these positions and recognition meant that Stan was among the elite biomedical investigators of the world. His achievements have yielded fundamental insights for basic biology and provided rational targets for the treatment of malignant disease. It is important for us at home to realize that our friend, classmate and former neighbor has had a lasting and profound influence in biology and medicine. Our loss is great and we share his family's grief.

Sincerely,

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