



IN MEMORIAM

Janis V. Giorgi

Professor of Medicine, Hematology and Oncology, Emerita
Los Angeles
1947–2000

Janis V. Giorgi, Ph.D., a pioneer in the search for an HIV vaccine and a UCLA immunologist who significantly expanded scientists' understanding of how the human immune system fights HIV infection, died on May 30, 2000 after a two-year battle with uterine cancer. She was only 53 years old. Professor Giorgi was born on May 23, 1947, and grew up in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. She graduated from the University of Florida in 1969, and earned her doctorate degree in 1977 and subsequently completed a postdoctoral fellowship in pathology in 1980 at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in Albuquerque.

In 1984, when the field of HIV immunology was in its infancy, the UCLA School of Medicine recruited Dr. Giorgi to launch its flow cytometry laboratory – a state-of-the-art facility that revolutionized research in AIDS, cancer, and other immune diseases. The laboratory's laser technology enabled scientists to sort human cells by type, number, and specific function, revealing for the first time how HIV destroys the immune system. Shortly after her arrival at UCLA, Professor Giorgi was awarded a five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that allowed her to direct the laboratory for the Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study conducted at UCLA and three other universities. In analyzing the blood of 1,635 gay and bisexual men, Dr. Giorgi made a surprising discovery: some of the men had been repeatedly exposed to HIV, but were never infected. This spurred Professor Giorgi to refocus her research on the elusive causes of resistance to HIV infection.

While most AIDS researchers focused on the virus itself, Dr. Giorgi believed that specific cells in the immune system help protect HIV-exposed individuals against infection and prevent some of those people infected with HIV from developing AIDS. Professor Giorgi's greatest discovery illuminated the role of CD38, a protein expressed by the body's infection-fighting T-cells. Dr. Giorgi was the first to reveal that the higher the CD38 level in a person infected with HIV, the worse the clinical prognosis. Professor Giorgi designed a rapid, inexpensive test that proved to be the most reliable tool in predicting whether HIV would progress to AIDS. This test has proved to be invaluable for physicians and HIV-positive patients alike as they make treatment plans and financial decisions. Professor Giorgi also demonstrated that HIV prematurely ages the immune system. With UCLA pathologist Rita B. Effros, Ph.D., Dr. Giorgi showed that the ravaged immune cells of HIV-infected patients resembled those of 100-year-olds. She concluded that HIV drives the immune system into a hyperactive frenzy, forcing HIV-specific cells to rapidly divide until the immune system grows too exhausted to prevent the virus from spreading.

In 1997, NIH appointed Professor Giorgi to a five-year term on its prestigious National Advisory Allergy and Infectious Diseases Council. The next year, POZ magazine included Dr. Giorgi in its list of "The 50 Most Innovative U.S. AIDS Researchers." Professor Giorgi served twice in the planning group for the International Conference of AIDS, and was a member of multiple NIH committees. She also participated as a member of the editorial boards of the Journal of Clinical Immunology, AIDS, and Cytometry, and served as a peer reviewer for 12 other scientific journals.

Professor Giorgi was a brilliant, resourceful, and accomplished scientist who possessed a creative spark that enriched her colleagues at the UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center. Dr. Giorgi's gift for inspiring her staff and colleagues, and her ability to laugh at herself made her one of the most admired and well-liked

researchers on campus. When The New Yorker profiled Dr. Giorgi's research in a lengthy article in July 1998, she was the first to joke that its publication was bumped back two months due to the magazine's extensive coverage of Monica Lewinsky.

During her battle against cancer, Professor Giorgi continued to produce some of her most innovative work. Shortly before her death, she finalized plans with gastroenterologist Dr. Peter Anton for UCLA's first human HIV vaccine trial. Anton will now carry out Dr. Giorgi's hypothesis and aim to trigger a natural immune response to HIV and harness the body's lymphatic system to circulate an HIV vaccine that has yielded promising results in primates. With a reputation for perfectionism, Professor Giorgi gained national attention for her prowess in cellular immunology early in her career. Her strong desire to excel shined as brightly in her love for entertaining, fly-fishing, and Harley Davidson motorcycles as in her scientific investigations.

Professor Giorgi is survived by a husband and partner of nineteen years, Duane Keith of Woodland Hills, California, and her sister, Shirley Vincent of Montclair, New Jersey.

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