

Cancerworld

Michael Sporn: A pioneer in prevention and a unique and special friend

Adriana Albini / 4 November 2022



Michael B. Sporn, an internationally recognised cancer researcher who was one of the discoverers of the tumour growth factor TGF beta and a strong advocate of Cancer Prevention, died on September 29, 2022 at his home in Tunbridge, Vermont. He was 89. His prolific career was devoted to developing new approaches and drugs for cancer, and in particular for intervening at precancerous or early stages to halt or reverse the transition to cancer.

I have never met anybody like Mike Sporn. He is probably the most intelligent, cultured and witty person that I ever encountered. Mike seemed to know everything about art, architecture, music - and obviously medical research. I could listen to him for hours and never be bored.

I met him for the first time when I was a post-doc at the US National Institutes of Health. He was centrally involved in the discovery of TGF- β - a molecule that I immediately found very intriguing, as at the time I was studying the chemotactic properties of growth factors.



Mike Sporn and Adriana Albini, *Cancerworld's* editor-in-chief

I became friends with Mike many years later, after we met at the San Antonio Breast Cancer Meeting, where together with Anita Roberts he was presented with the 2005 Susan G. Komen Foundation Brinker Award for Distinguished Science in the area of basic research, for their joint research on the cytokine transforming growth factor beta (TGF- β).

I went to talk to him about the field that I had introduced with my laboratory, 'angio-prevention', and about the preventive drug fenretinide, one of the molecules Mike had been studying - as did the team of Alberto Costa, Andrea DeCensi and Umberto Veronesi in Milan. That day we decided to collaborate on triterpenoids as anti-angiogenic moieties, and we went on to write five papers together - an experience which I greatly enjoyed. One of those was a *Nature Reviews* paper on [The tumour microenvironment as a target for chemoprevention](#).

Mike was quite special, sometimes almost intimidating, but he could also be very funny, he had a subtle and elegant sense of humour and irony and I laughed a lot whenever we met.

Generally, we would have coffee or dinner at the annual meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), and visited me three times in Italy. Mike loved Venice, my birthplace, and he knew Venice better than I do. His first visit was at the end of 2006, with his wife, Kitte. The second time was in 2011, after the death of his wife, when Mike was in Milan for the World Oncology Forum session on cancer prevention, organised by the European School of Oncology. That time we wandered around the town together, principally to remember places he had been with Kitte, that they loved together.

More recently he travelled to Florence and we had a nice walk and brain storm with common friends.

Over the years we exchanged many emails, touching on art, poems, history, science, beauty, philosophy and jokes. I went to visit him with my husband and children in Vermont in 2018, to his home surrounded by nature.

I consider Mike one of the most inspirational people in my life. He always made me think a bit deeper, taking a trip into the science of prevention - and I am grateful that he shared views on hindering cancer before it starts. At a time when women scientists had to fight for recognition even more than we still do, he also deserves credit, for the esteem in which he held many women scientists, including Anita Roberts, Lalage Wakefield, Karen Liby, and Nanjoo Suh.

Our pioneer CW Editor Alberto Costa invited him to ESO events and had a great respect for Mike's work and his leadership in cancer prevention.



Mike Sporn and Alberto Costa former *Cancerworld's* editor-in-chief