

Henry F. Epstein

Henry F. Epstein, a medical doctor and neuroscientist, whose study of protein structure has paved the way for translational therapies of cancer and heart disease, died on Saturday, February 2, in Houston, Texas. He was 68. The cause was liver cancer, his wife, Dr. Maxine W. Epstein, said. He had lived in Houston. Dr. Epstein was Chairman of the Department of Neuroscience & Cell Biology and the holder of the Cecil H. & Ida M. Green Distinguished University Chair in Neuroscience & Cell Biology at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Texas. Epstein led the creation of UTMB's Department of Neuroscience and Cell Biology, which was formed by consolidating the Departments of Anatomy, Neurosciences, Physiology and Biophysics. Dr. Epstein was privileged to contribute to the work leading to two Nobel Prizes: Dr. Christian B. Anfinsen's 1972 Nobel Prize in Chemistry and Dr. Sydney Brenner's 2002 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. His distinguished career was marked by pioneering work on the mechanisms of protein folding and in establishing the molecular genetics of muscle development and cell motility. His latest work focused on characterizing novel proteins regulating the cytoskeleton. Dr. Epstein served in a number of professional and scientific organizations, including as President of the Rice-Texas Center Chapter of Sigma Xi, member of the Molecular and Cell Biology Review Committee of the European Space Agency in Brussels, Belgium, and as a long-term member of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Muscular Dystrophy Association. He co-edited three internationally recognized books in three distinct fields: *Muscle Development: Molecular and Cellular Control*, 1982, co-editor M.L. Pearson; *Genetics of the X-Chromosome: Studies of Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and Related Disorders*, 1982, co-editor S.G. Wolf; and *Caenorhabditis elegans: Modern Biological Analysis of an Organism*, 1995, co-editor D.C. Shakes. Dr. Epstein was a distinguished visiting professor at the University of Basel in Switzerland and the Kwanju National Institute of Science and Technology in the Republic of Korea, as well as served on the board of several scientific journals. His research was the subject of hundreds of peer-review articles and several book chapters. Dr. Epstein was once profiled by a Biochemistry and Molecular Biology student at UTMB, who wrote, "He is a mountain of knowledge and anecdotes. Being one of the most senior scientists in UTMB he brings together the old and new schools of thought and bridges the gap between pure and applied biochemistry and molecular biology." Henry Epstein was driven to pursue research because of "the highs of discovery" according to the profile. Epstein's approach to science – one that stressed the interaction with peers and other scientists as a major contributing factor to the quality of science – was informed by his undergraduate studies in Philosophy at Columbia University, where John Dewey's pragmatism informed the philosophical study of the natural sciences. Students, colleagues and family recall discussions with Dr. Epstein as an opportunity to engage in learning through educative discourse. Epstein had the ability to give new breath to old and difficult concepts that often eluded public interest. Henry Epstein dedicated his mind to thinking: thoughts mattered for the sake of the novel and interesting. He took ideas seriously without taking himself too seriously and always kept a healthy sense of humor as well as a strong palate for good food and great conversation. Henry Fredric Epstein was born on Oct. 13, 1944, to a Jewish family in the Bronx, New York. At age 15, he enrolled as an early admittee at Columbia University, and discovered his lifelong passion for rowing. In 1968, after graduating from Stanford's then five year medical school in four years, Epstein became a research fellow at Yale, then worked at the National Institutes of Health, leaving in 1971 to serve as a fellow at Cambridge University before landing back at Stanford as an Assistant Professor. In 1981, Dr. Epstein became a full professor at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, where he worked until becoming the Chairman of the Department of Neuroscience at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston in 2004. Besides his wife, Dr. Epstein is survived by two sons, Adam (and wife Clara Chaya), of Brooklyn, and Daniel (and wife Yael), of Washington, D.C., two step-daughters, Jennifer Henderson (and husband Craig), of Corpus Christi, TX, and Veronica Zisman (and husband Stuart), of Houston, TX, one grandchild (Mushka Epstein), and seven step-grandchildren (Abbarane, Brady, Cormac, and Kara Henderson and Holden, Dylan and Josie Zisman). Dr. Epstein's final lecture -- two months before his death -- was recorded by Rice University, available here: http://edtech.rice.edu/www/?option=com_iwebcast&task=webcast&action=details&event=2717.