Invited Perspective

In Memory of Lissy F. Jarvik, MD, Ph.D.: Reflections on her Life Well Lived

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“I make a difference in two ways. First, through my research and research findings. And second, through mentoring students, trainees, and fellows.”

Lissy F. Jarvik, M.D., Ph.D.

Lissy F. Jarvik, MD, PhD died peacefully in her sleep on Friday October 1, 2021 at the age of 97 years in her home in Santa Monica. She was a trailblazing pioneer in the field of geriatric mental health and amongst the first to determine that “senile dementia” was not a part of normal aging, and whose work helped guide the field of Alzheimer’s disease research.

In her own words: "My career in aging spanned the field from mental changes, to psychiatric aspects, to genetic changes, chromosomal changes, also drug treatment and psychological treatments. Throughout my career, it was the elderly patients, their spouses, children, siblings and other relatives who made it possible for me to pursue research, and who contributed so much to the increasing knowledge base on aging.”

For those who knew Lissy, she was always “a forceful warrior with a cause”, a remarkable woman who created the field of geriatric neuropsychiatry, and influenced careers of hundreds in the field. She created a foundation for modern research in Alzheimer’s disease. She was always passionate about science and medical education, and mentoring. The National Library of Medicine featured her in their interactive “Changing the Face of Medicine” exhibit, describing her as "a pioneer in the field of neuropsychogeriatrics.” For her "distinguished contributions in the general field of psychiatry and mental health," Dr. Lissy Jarvik was the first recipient of the American College of Physicians William C. Menninger Memorial Award in 1993. She was also the first woman psychiatrist appointed a distinguished physician by the
Lissy Jarvik was born Lissy Feingold in the Hague, Netherlands on March 17, 1924 to a Jewish family. In 1940, she fled the Netherlands, which was overtaken by Nazi Germany, for the United States in a dramatic escape. In 1946, she graduated cum laude from Hunter College. She went on to earn her master’s degree and Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1947 and 1950, respectively. While studying for her doctorate at Columbia, she began working on a twin study with her mentor, Franz Josef Kallmann, MD, with whom she traveled around New York state to catalog medical and psychological data on twins. Her dissertation, still the only one of its kind worldwide, grew into her life’s work. Intending to “disentangle the whole question of genetics and the environment in aging,” Dr. Jarvik followed 134 pairs of identical and fraternal twins who were at least 60 years of age at the study’s outset. Throughout the next twenty years, she continued to follow the twins, documenting changes in mental functioning, survival trends, cancer rates, and general health history. The study’s findings demonstrated a strong genetic component of the aging process and a tie between physical and mental impairments in aging.

Despite her remarkable drive and aptitude, she failed several applications to medical school, which she considered to be the biggest obstacle in her life: “I was a woman; we didn’t have any money; and I was a refugee—a fatal combination at the time if you wanted to go to medical school.” But her persistence paid off, and after receiving her Ph.D from Columbia University, she went on to receive her M.D. from Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in 1954. She returned to New York and continued her research at Columbia’s department of psychiatry and at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. She married Dr. Murray Jarvik in 1954, and had her sons (Laurence and Jeffrey) in 1956 and 1959.

In the early 1970s, Dr. Jarvik moved to Los Angeles and became Professor of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at UCLA, where she established the first inpatient psychogeriatric unit, and the first course in behavioral sciences for first-year medical students that involved a large effort of attracting multi-disciplinary faculty. Dr. Kenneth Wells was a junior faculty at that time and was assigned to teach in that course. He remembers Lissy dealing with that difficult task “with a total joy because it meant meeting all students and connecting them to communities and health systems all over the county and showing students the importance of an empathic approach to care.”

Lissy was instrumental in establishing a fellowship in geriatric psychiatry at UCLA, which was one of the first five fellowships in Geriatric Psychiatry in the country, and one of the first to be ACGME accredited with more than 150 fellows trained over the past 41 years. She insisted on forging training, education, and research collaborations among geriatric medicine, geriatric neuropsychology, and behavioral neurology, which has been and continues to be the hallmark of this training program. Graduates of this program have succeeded in academic, research, clinical, and specialty practices.

In 1981, Dr. Jarvik hosted the first independent meeting of the American Association of Geriatric Psychiatry (AAGP) that just separated from the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in Los Angeles, where a small group of visionaries met to discuss late-life mental health needs and the field of geriatric psychiatry.
Today, the AAGP is an established membership association of nearly 2,000 geriatric psychiatrists and other healthcare professionals in the United States, Canada, and abroad, dedicated to the mental well-being of older adults. Lissy Jarvik served as AAGP president in 1984-85. Lissy took a leadership role in testifying before the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (together with Jerry Yesavage and George Grossberg) to convince them to approve Geriatric Psychiatry as a specialty within the field of Psychiatry.

From 1987 to 1993 Dr. Jarvik was the first woman psychiatrist, and the second woman ever appointed as a 'Distinguished Physician' in the Department of Veterans Affairs. She traveled throughout the United States in order to meet and interact with physicians in various specialties so that she could heighten their awareness to the needs of older veterans, mostly World War II veterans. She visited more than half of the VA Medical Centers at least once, and made numerous trips to VA Headquarters in Washington, DC to consult on strategies and implementation. Through face-to-face meetings, rounds, lectures, seminars, and workshops, she was able increase interest in the older veterans and facilitate the start of new training, treatment and research programs throughout the VA system.

Dr. Jarvik was at the forefront in the use of investigational drugs for treating geriatric patients with both Alzheimer's disease and major depressive disorders. She was also among the first to emphasize the role of microtubules in the pathogenesis of Alzheimer's disease, and to use psychotherapeutic approaches to the treatment of geriatric patients, as well as the role of family caregivers. In 1988, with Dr. Gary Small, Dr. Jarvik co-authored Parentcare: A Common-sense Guide for Adult Children. Written for the “sandwich generation”—adults caring for both their children and their parents at the same time—the book was one of the first guides of its kind. Dr. Jarvik explained: “The book came about because I saw in research subjects how involved the children became in their parents’ healthcare and their parents’ lives. I learned how they were committed to helping their parents, how they were bewildered by their new unexpected responsibilities and the unforeseen changes in their relationships with their parents.”

Lissy’s biggest talent and the foundation of her success was her ability to attract capable people and inspire them to work together in creating new exciting frontiers. I was always amazed by the large number of people who worked with her and always gravitated to her personally. All of her birthdays after her retirement were widely celebrated and organized by her former colleagues who experienced her kindness or benefitted from her presence in some ways.

Several of us, her former fellows, were able to attend her 95th birthday at her home in Santa Monica in March of 2019, which included multiple generations of former colleagues, fellows, students, and her family engaged in a very festive affair that included a large cake with her portrait. It felt like a big extended family, and it took her a good 15 minutes to blow out all of the candles on the cake.

Lissy F. Jarvik lived a long and virtuous life, and lived it well, improving the lives of countless others. She was preceded in death by her husband of 53 years, Murray Elias Jarvik MD, PhD in 2008. She is survived by her two sons, Laurence (Larry) and Jeffrey (Jerry) Jarvik, and their spouses, Nancy Strickland and Gail Pairitz Jarvik, as well as by her three grandchildren, Ella, Leah, and Ethan Jarvik.

As Dr. Dilip Jeste summed up her life: “Lissy was a role model for all of us. She was truly a pioneer in geriatric psychiatry and dementia research. She has overcome many challenges in her life. It is amazing what she did considering the various stigmas she had to fight against: sexism, antisemitism, ageism, and being an immigrant from eastern Europe. It was an honor just knowing her”. This was echoed by Dr. Jeffrey Cummings “She was a leader in the field and created the platforms on which many built their careers. We are lucky to have had her in our lives.” Dr. Bruce Miller agreed “Lissy started life with courage and heroism and was a great leader and colleague. What a loss but she gave so much to the world.”

And I say: “We all should be so lucky to live this long, achieve this much, and be remembered by so many. May you rest in peace, Lissy.”

References

Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2021 3