

Cecil C. Yip
1937-2007

Cecil Cheung-Ching Yip passed away peacefully on November 27, 2007 in his 70th year, at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto, Ontario. Beloved husband of Yvette, father of sons Christopher and his wife Jennifer, and Adrian and his wife Susan, grandfather of Carolyn and Evan. Predeceased by his father Yip Sum Wah. Survived by his mother Yip Luk Wai-Yee, his brother Patrick and his wife Jean, and sisters Jenifer Cheung and her husband Jonathan, Yan Yan Hua, and Chin Chin Wan. Beloved uncle to Bill Cheung and wife Emily, Colleen Hua, Stephen Hua and his wife Linda, Jerome Wan, and Gabriel Wan.

Dr. Yip was well known in the Faculty of Medicine and at the University of Toronto as former Chair of the Banting and Best Department of Medical Research. He spent over 40 years as an outstanding researcher, teacher, scholar, and visionary. Prior to his retirement, he held the senior academic position of Vice Dean Research in the Faculty of Medicine. He contributed broadly to the governance and leadership of the University over several decades and also to the leadership of the University of Toronto Faculty Association. Professor Yip was an outstanding scientist in the field of insulin biology relevant to diabetes who mentored many of our faculty and students. His contribution to innovation and growth of research in our Faculty was truly remarkable. His vision of a new concept for inter-disciplinary research has now been realized in the successful establishment of the Terrence Donnelly Center for Cellular and Biomolecular Research.

By the College Street entrance to the Terrence Donnelly Centre for Cellular and Biomolecular Research, there is a plaque which reads “Concept – Perseverance – Completion.” It reflects the guiding philosophy behind the Donnelly CCBR, but also embodies the spirit of Cecil Cheung-Ching Yip – the researcher, teacher and administrator.

“He was a strong advocate of interdisciplinary research,” says his son Christopher Yip, also a U of T professor, member of the Donnelly CCBR and Canada Research Chair in Molecular Imaging. “It was really his concept of such a revolutionary new approach that I think illustrates his broad vision and ability to bring people together.”

While Cecil Yip earned his Bachelor of Science degree at McMaster University (1959), he moved to the U.S. to complete his PhD at Rockefeller University, New York (1963). Fortunately, Canada lured him back with an invitation by Charles Best at U of T through Yip’s PhD supervisor at Rockefeller. As Christopher sums it up: “Charlie Best offered him a lab and off he went.” In July 1964, Cecil joined the Banting and Best Department of Medical Research at the University of Toronto, as an Assistant Professor, eventually becoming Department Chair in 1987.

As a researcher, Cecil made his breakthrough in diabetes research in 1978 – the discovery of an insulin receptor. He was also the first to use photo-activated insulin to identify the insulin receptor and later in his career, provided a 3D reconstruction of the insulin receptor bound to insulin.

“While Cecil’s discovery of the insulin receptor spawned much research on the interaction between insulin and its cellular target in many laboratories, including his own work, Cecil felt that knowing the structure of the receptor could gain us a major insight into the details of the interaction that biochemistry alone could not furnish,” says Prof. Peter Ottensmeyer (Department of Biophysics) who collaborated with Cecil on the 3D work. “Understanding the insulin-insulin receptor structure would be of great benefit for the design of new drugs for the treatment of insulin-dependent diabetes, and for understanding the basic mechanisms of insulin signalling,” explains Christopher.

Although a scientist at heart, Cecil also enjoyed his role as an academic administrator, accepting the post as the first Vice-Dean, Research, Faculty of Medicine, from 1993 to 2002. Cecil later played a pivotal role in creating the Donnelly CCBR, an interdisciplinary biomedical research institute at the University of Toronto. He became its Interim Co-Director from 2002 to 2004, then Director Emeritus in 2004.

“I think he enjoyed interacting with other researchers and helping facilitate their research programs and in a sense helping to guide the Faculty of Medicine’s new research directions,” says Christopher.

Helping to advance the understanding of diabetes seems but a small contribution when viewed in the larger context of the leadership, mentoring, and collaborative spirit which he also embraced.

Cecil Cheung-Ching Yip will be greatly missed.

Credits to the University of Toronto