



Leon J. Thal, M.D.
1944–2007

The world has lost its champion in the fight against Alzheimer's disease, and we have lost a dear friend. Leon Thal died in an airplane accident on February 3.

Dr. Thal was Distinguished Professor and Chair of Neurosciences at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine, Director of the Shiley-Marcos Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, and Director of the Alzheimer's Disease Cooperative Study. These professional titles do little justice to how hard he worked or the profound effect he had on the field and everyone he touched.

Dr. Thal was one of the few clinical researchers whose efforts contributed significantly to understanding the cause, treatment, and prevention of Alzheimer's disease. First in the laboratory and then in the organization of clinical trials, his efforts led to the first approved medication (a cholinesterase inhibitor) for the treatment of Alzheimer's patients. In the process, he emerged as a crucial figure in the development of medications for Alzheimer's disease and established the standard for their assessment and FDA approval. Dr. Thal transformed the way in which Alzhei-

mer's clinical trials are performed—through the force of his vision and his determination, graciously facilitated by kindness, humor, and fairness, and because of the unequaled esteem in which he was held by leaders in academia, industry, regulatory agencies, and the Alzheimer's Association.

Achieving the impossible, this remarkable man created and led the NIH-sponsored Alzheimer's Disease Cooperative Study, comprising clinical trials researchers from 80 academic organizations and providing one of the world's leading resources for testing promising new therapies for treating Alzheimer's disease. Imagine harnessing all of this talent and bringing out the best in bright individuals with 80 different strongly held opinions about how to conduct clinical trials! Now in its 16th year, the consortium is on the brink of its most productive and promising era, with treatment trials that have the potential to derail the pathologic train that leads to the plaques and tangles of this devastating illness. More recently, Dr. Thal helped galvanize support for the NIH-sponsored Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative, which will provide the foundation for the use of brain imaging and other biomarker measurements in evaluating promising disease-slowng treatments in the most rigorous and cost-effective way. Along the way, he successfully united experts in industry, academia, and government in efforts to achieve goals that transcended any individual agenda.

Dr. Thal received numerous honors for his accomplishments, including the Potamkin Prize, which some regard as the Nobel Prize for the field of Alzheimer's disease and related disorders. Despite this recognition, he remained a modest, warm, and giving man and a dedicated physician. He cared deeply about his patients and families. He was beloved. Each of us who knew him felt that we had a special place in his heart. Perhaps his proudest accomplishment was the cadre of researchers in Alzheimer's disease and dementia that he mentored, and in whom his legacy will live. Dr. Thal sought and brought out the best in us and invited us to adventure. We are diminished by his loss and strengthened in our resolve to fulfill his inspirational dream—creating a world without Alzheimer's disease.

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