

A Tribute to Dr. Louis C. Lasagna: 1923–2003

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It was April 1976. I had come to the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry to interview for admission into the graduate program in the Department of Pharmacology and Experimental Toxicology. When I mentioned to several of the faculty interviewers that I was interested in sleep physiology and the pharmacological treatment of sleep disorders, they told me that I should speak with the chairman of the department, Dr. Louis Lasagna. They mentioned that he had done studies on hypnotic medications, and that he was the founder of a new field called clinical pharmacology, which integrates the science of drug effects and interactions into the practice of clinical medicine.

A soft-spoken man in his fifties, with sparkling eyes and tousled hair, wearing an odd combination of well-worn olive colored corduroy pants, a red turtleneck, and a pair of tan Wallabies, greeted me when I entered Dr. Lasagna's office. In the next 15 minutes, the man who was to change my life asked me questions about my interests, talked about the emerging field of clinical pharmacology, told me about his recently completed book on the impact of pharmaceutical regulation on drug innovation, and encouraged me to join the pharmacology department at the University of Rochester. I was won over. I joined the department in August 1976, the same

year that Dr. Lasagna founded the Center for the Study of Drug Development. Over the next 27 years, Louis Lasagna would be my mentor, colleague, and close personal friend.

Lou Lasagna was a pioneer, a visionary, an intellectual, a renaissance man. His accomplishments extend over a vast array of topics. Through his teaching he personally influenced the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals. Indirectly, his legacy continues to affect millions.

In a remarkable career that spanned five decades, Lou worked and wrote extensively in the fields of clinical trial methodology, analgesics, hypnotics, and medical ethics. In 1954, he was the first to study and describe the now well-accepted placebo effect. Later he demonstrated the necessity of placebo-controlled clinical trials in studying analgesics, and he became a life-long advocate of using rigorous scientific evaluation in the study of new drugs. His testimony in Congress at the 1962 Kefauver hearings was instrumental in establishing the efficacy requirement for new drugs in the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act.

In addition to his pioneering work in clinical pharmacology and trial design, Lou was a tireless advocate of what he sometimes called "common sense drug regulation." He was the first to

document the fact that overly cautious regulation serves as a disincentive for innovation in the research-based drug industry and delays access to new medicines. His strong belief that solid data and analyses should serve as the basis for political discussions regarding drug policy led to his founding in 1976 of the Center for the Study of Drug Development. The group which I have had the privilege of working for since 1986, and now serve as its director, moved from the University of Rochester to Tufts University in 1984, when Lou joined the faculty of the Tufts University School of Medicine and became the new dean of the Sackler School of Graduate Biomedical Sciences.

Recognized as a leader in the science of drug regulation, Lou Lasagna served on the Commission on the Federal Drug Approval Process, which reported its findings to Congress in April 1982. He was a member of the General Accounting Office's Health Advisory Committee. He was chairman of the President's National Committee to Review Current Procedures for Approval of New Drugs for Cancer and AIDS, also known as the "Lasagna Committee," whose findings became the backbone of President George H.W. Bush's Competitiveness Council Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Reform Proposal in 1991. He was appointed to Health Secretary Louis Sullivan's "Blue Ribbon Panel" to examine FDA performance and recommend initiatives to improve efficiency at the agency. More recently he served with three former FDA commissioners on the "Rogers Group" to prepare an agenda for FDA reform.

In 1964, Lou Lasagna wrote in a *Time Magazine* article that the Hippocratic oath, spoken by medical school graduates for generations, was in need of updating to make it more relevant to today's physicians. He called for a worldwide competition to update the oath. His own entry, which suggested that "warmth, sympathy, and understanding" are often a physician's most

powerful tools, is today recited by doctors at graduation ceremonies at many medical schools across the United States.

Lou Lasagna worked tirelessly on behalf of retarded children. The father of a son with Down's syndrome, Lou was a long-time advocate for better public understanding of the needs of retarded individuals. In 1988, the Kadima School for Special Children in Natanya, Israel, dedicated the Professor Louis Lasagna Building, which includes classrooms, consultation rooms, and an auditorium. More importantly, the addition raised the school's enrollment capacity from 20 to approximately 150 students, essentially serving the entire country of Israel.

Lou Lasagna served as dean of the Sackler School of Graduate Biomedical Sciences at Tufts University from 1984 to 2002. He also served as director of the Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development until 1998. He had the unique honor of having two endowed chairs named for him, at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry and at Tufts University School of Medicine. And in 1997, his seminal 1954 article on the placebo effect was ranked by *Lancet* editor Richard Horton as among the world's 27 most notable achievements in a medical canon going back to Hippocrates.

Personable, compassionate, modest, a lover of music and the arts, Dr. Lasagna was an educator, physician, and researcher in a class by himself. In 1996, at the DIA's Annual Meeting in San Diego, I had the great privilege of presenting Lou Lasagna with the DIA's Distinguished Career Award, one of many prestigious honors and awards he received over the course of his career.

Dr. Lasagna—teacher, colleague, and friend to many—died on August 6, 2003 following a long battle with lymphoma. He was 80 years old. He is survived by his wife, Helen, his seven children, and his eight grandchildren.