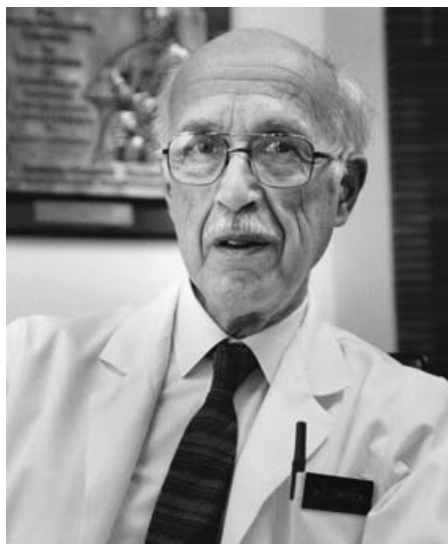


George Wills Comstock, 1915–2007

GEORGE WILLS COMSTOCK, Professor Emeritus of Epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and a physician-epidemiologist of unparalleled eminence in the field of tuberculosis control, died of prostate cancer at his home in Smithsburg, Maryland, USA, on 15 July 2007. He was 92. In a career that spanned close to seven decades, Comstock made important contributions to all areas of the study of tuberculosis, conducting landmark studies of tuberculosis epidemiology, natural history, preventive therapy and BCG vaccination. From his earliest



years with the United States Public Health Service through his recent period of so-called retirement, Comstock's analysis, wisdom and keen insight into the public health implications of clinical and epidemiological data helped shape public policies for tuberculosis control in the United States and the world. The hallmark of all of Comstock's research is his focus on the community-level burden of disease and outcomes of public health interventions.

Born in Niagara Falls, New York, Comstock graduated from Antioch College and Harvard Medical School. He later received an MPH from the University of Michigan and a DrPH from Johns Hopkins. After serving as a ship's doctor in World War II, Comstock joined the US Public Health Service Tuberculosis Program and was sent to Muscogee County, Georgia, to organize field research in preparation for a trial of BCG vaccine. The results of the trial, and of another study in Puerto Rico that he also helped lead, showed low overall efficacy of BCG. As a consequence, BCG was never formally adopted as a control strategy in the USA.

Comstock went to Alaska in the mid-1950s, where a tuberculosis epidemic was ravaging the native population. He organized one of the first cluster-randomized trials in medical history, enrolling the entire population of the Bethel region in a trial of isoniazid, with each household randomly allocated to receive the drug or a placebo. After one year, tuberculosis incidence was reduced by 69% in the isoniazid households, and this benefit was sustained through 5 years of follow-up. In a remarkable post-script to the trial, prior to the existence of institutional review boards and before the birth of bioethics, Comstock returned to Bethel to ensure that all residents of the region received iso-

niazid therapy, arguing that it was essential that the population that bore the burden of the research fully benefited from its fruits.

Comstock retired from the Public Health Service in 1962 and joined the faculty of the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, as it was then known, establishing a public health research training center in Hagerstown, Maryland, where he taught students and conducted population-based research. In addition to continuing his work in tuberculosis, he also conducted seminal work in cardiovascular and cancer epidemiology, ocular

disease and nutrition. The center was named in his honor in 2005. In his 45 years as a faculty member, he taught and mentored thousands of students who have gone on to leadership roles in public health and medicine, and served as a dissertation advisor to hundreds. He served as Editor of the American Journal of Epidemiology for 9 years and was later named Editor Emeritus. Although he officially retired in 2003 at the age of 88, he continued to teach his beloved 'Epidemiologic Basis for Tuberculosis Control' class, review journal articles, and publish papers. He maintained an active medical license, most recently renewed in 2006.

Comstock was revered by his peers and esteemed by his students. He received numerous awards, including the Trudeau Medal, the John Snow Award, the Maxwell Finland Award, and others. He was also an accomplished musician and played in several orchestras, most recently the Frederick (MD) Symphony.

Comstock is survived by his second wife, Emma Lou Davis Comstock, three children and five grandchildren. His first wife, Margaret Karr Comstock, died in 1999. In a 2000 documentary video entitled 'Lucky All My Life', Comstock attributed his success to being a survivor who had the good fortune to work with wonderful and talented colleagues and to find himself in the right place at the right time. But those who knew, studied under, collaborated with, or simply learned from this great and kind man know that we were the lucky ones.

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