

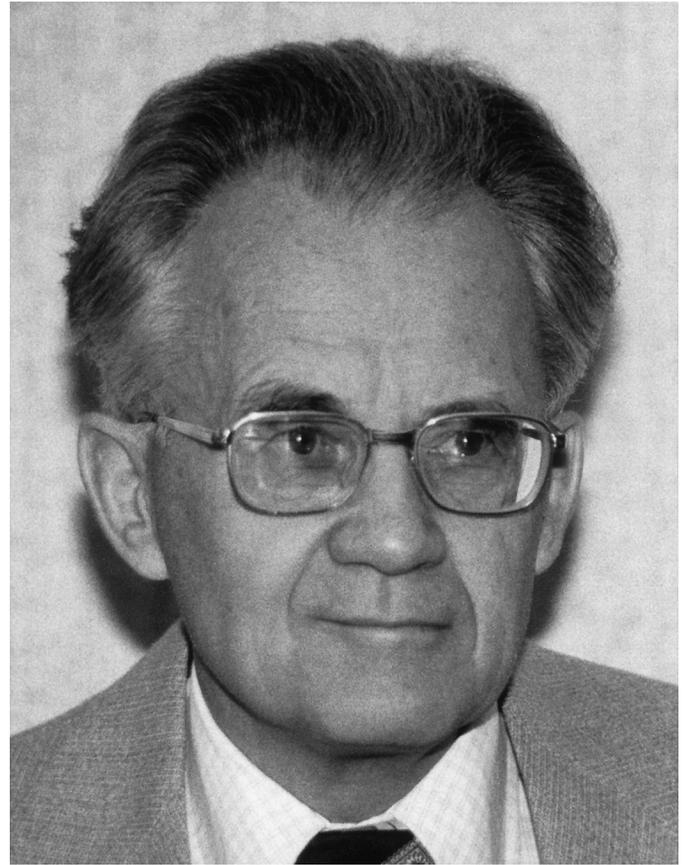
OTTO SCHAEFER (1919–2009)

Otto Schaefer, considered one of the great pioneers of Arctic medicine, died at his home in Jasper, Alberta, on November 2, 2009 at the age of 90.

Born in 1919 near Bonn, Germany, he grew up in a middle-class family. Early on, books by Knud Rasmussen and Franz Boas inspired an interest in Arctic Canada. At that time, his interest in a foreign country, plus his refusal to join the Hitler Youth, meant that he could not enter the University of Bonn to study medicine until, following advice from a friend, he joined the army. He was then accepted and spent his military years as a medical student caring for wounded soldiers. His dream of becoming a doctor was fulfilled in 1944, when he graduated in Medicine from the University of Heidelberg, where he interned in surgery, obstetrics, and pediatrics. In 1946 he returned to get a specialist degree, received in 1950.

Otto fulfilled his dream of doctoring to the Inuit when he emigrated to Canada in 1951, followed by his fiancée, Editha (Didi), who was also trained in medicine. After working in Saskatchewan and at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton, where he obtained his licence from the Medical Council of Canada, he was assigned to the Charles Camsell Hospital, the Indian and Northern Services referral hospital for the Western Arctic. This was the beginning of 32 working years in which he devoted himself to the health care of those living across the breadth of Canada's Arctic.

At the Camsell Hospital, where he first met Indians and Inuit from northern Canada, he made every effort to learn their ways and to study the diseases and ailments that required their evacuation to the south. Two-thirds of the 400 beds were filled with tuberculosis patients of all ages, including children with tuberculous meningitis. Schaefer noted their loneliness away from home and learned from them about other diseases that ran rampant in northern communities. After three months, he felt his orientation to the North was complete. In January 1953, he got the call to go to Aklavik in the Mackenzie Delta. Initially called *shik shik* (little squirrel) for his gait, he would later be known affectionately as *luttaakuluk* (dear little doctor). At Aklavik, he was required to do the major surgery at the Anglican and Roman Catholic hospitals as well as to travel by dog team and canoe to the outlying settlements and camps. He continued to absorb as much as he could from the Inuvialuit and Gwich'in, including their wisdom and resourceful practices such as using spruce gum applied to wounds. There also, the Schaefer's son Lothar was born. After two years, Otto and Didi, his staunch supporter, were posted to Pangnirtung on Baffin Island, where they would spend two years. Helped by an elder, Etuangat, who insisted on using Inuktitut, Schaefer learned much about the Inuit from their traditional remedies (whether successful or not) and from the way Etuangat taught his own son. The two men traveled by dog team to the settlements and camps of Baffin Island, sometimes in blizzard conditions. Hospital work and medical examinations were part of the routine. Schaefer learned



Otto Schaefer, MD

the Inuktitut language, ate raw frozen caribou meat, operated by the light of a seal-oil lamp, and developed a genuine friendship and rapport with the Inuit. The Schaefer family, increased by a daughter Taoya, enjoyed the beautiful country, the music, and the celebrations.

In 1960, after Otto's second stint back at the Camsell and a further internship at University Hospital in Edmonton, the lure of the North took the Schaefer family to Whitehorse. Ever curious, Otto continued to write about the Natives in his notebook. Already he had published an article on his observations of medical problems in the Arctic, the first of 110 articles he authored or co-authored. As he detailed the measles epidemics and the physical existence and self-care of Inuit hunters, he stressed the impact on northern society of burgeoning "civilization" and the need for better understanding of health problems as the North increased in importance. In Whitehorse, he led a campaign to reduce the impact of alcohol on native populations, despite lack of encouragement from others. A direct result of his action and the response it engendered led to the offer to become the first director of the Northern Medical Research Unit. After consulting with Didi, he accepted in 1964.

Almost immediately he was involved in two major health surveys, the first in the Central Arctic and the second in the Eastern Arctic aboard the *C.D. Howe*. While in Coppermine

in 1964, Otto was called to help in a meningitis epidemic in the Keewatin District. The next year, he surveyed four diverse Inuit settlements to observe food habits, activities, and lifestyles and discovered major differences in health among the four, depending on the rapidity of the impact of Western culture. Those communities relying mainly on traditional foods were thriving in contrast to the ones depending more on high-calorie, low-protein, starchy foods from stores. Adoption of a Western diet and lifestyle was clearly leading to a deterioration in overall health, with increased incidences of obesity, tooth decay, alcoholism, venereal diseases, and suicide. In his work as director, which involved extensive trips to various communities, Otto focused on the dramatic changes in lifestyle that affected the health of Inuit as they moved from camps and the land to settlements and houses. His careful notes, he felt, would be a boon to future health-care personnel. Far from doing "ivory tower" research, he ensured that his investigations and writings (on infectious diseases, hunters' "frozen lung," alcohol intolerance, dangers of bottle feeding, and impact of southern culture) were oriented to practical value, and he did his best to solicit the help of other health workers and share his findings with them.

In 1974, Otto chaired the Third International Symposium on Circumpolar Health, which he chose to place in Yellowknife, so that Northerners could be involved. Recognized as an international authority on the health of circumpolar dwellers, Otto received many honours and awards. In 1976, Governor General Jules Léger pinned the Order of Canada on the lapel of Otto's borrowed suit. In 1981, his work was recognized with the opening of the Dr. Otto Schaefer Health Resource Centre of the Department of Health, Government of the Northwest Territories, in Yellowknife. That same year, Otto was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Manitoba. In 1987, he was awarded the Jack Hildes Medal, named after his long-time collaborator and friend.

Otto was expecting to retire in 1984, but the Department asked him to stay on another year before he officially retired in December 1985. In the summer of 1984, he and Didi were able to make a homecoming visit to Pangnirtung, which had changed considerably over the years. In November 1995, his old friend, 95-year-old Etuangat, received the Order of Canada from Governor General Roméo LeBlanc.

In retirement in Edmonton, among a house full of memories and mementoes, Otto continued to publish. Retirement was not without its share of heartaches. His daughter Heidi died in a climbing accident in December 1988, and a wilderness preservation award was named in her honour. Didi, his beloved supporter of 37 years, passed away in April 1992 after a fight with cancer. For some time, Otto continued to live in the house he and Didi had shared, but he spent the last few years of his life in the Jasper home of his daughter Monika.

Otto was very unassuming when asked about his contributions. The citation for an award from the Canadian Public Health Association indicated that his work was admired internationally. A former colleague from the Charles Camsell Hospital, reflecting on Otto's selfless, intense devotion to solving northern health problems, suggested that his contributions to Inuit health could not be overestimated.

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