In Memoriam: Robert Johns Haggerty

Robert Haggerty, M.D., former Chair of the Department of Pediatrics, died on Tuesday. He was 92.

Throughout a career that spanned six decades, Haggerty led numerous child health initiatives that changed the way that pediatricians — and in some cases, entire health systems — practice medicine. His substantial contributions to the field were so wide-reaching and varied that a colleague once referred to him as “the Joe DiMaggio of pediatrics.”

“Without question, Dr. Haggerty was one of the most important and impactful leaders of his generation — and those generations that followed,” said Philip Pizzo, M.D., (SMD, 1970) David and Susan Heckerman Professor of Pediatrics and Microbiology and Immunology and Former Dean of the Stanford University School of Medicine. “He helped redefine the field of pediatrics and child health, developed innovative programs that improved the lives of communities, and connected pediatrics with educators to address the impact of poverty and disparity on the health and well-being of children.”

Haggerty was the third Chair of the Department of Pediatrics at URMC, serving from 1964 to 1975. He oversaw the development of Anthony Jordan Health Center, Oak Orchard Health Center, and Threshold Center for Alternative Youth Services, which gained Rochester worldwide acclaim for its approach to ambulatory pediatrics and its efforts to ensure that underserved children had a medical home. His 1968 textbook (with Dr. Morris Green) Ambulatory Pediatrics was the first to focus on the prevention of illness and care of children with common illnesses and problem behaviors.

“At the time he first proposed community and ambulatory pediatrics, this was a very unique and revolutionary notion,” said Nina Schor, M.D., Ph.D., Deputy Director of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke at the National Institutes of Health, and past Chair of the Department of Pediatrics at URMC. “Lucky for all of us, in Rochester, Dr. Haggerty had many enthusiastic and extraordinarily creative colleagues among the community pediatricians with whom he made enormous strides in closing what was a large gap between academic pediatrics and the health of children and families in the ‘real world.’”

Added Ruth Lawrence, M.D., Northumberland Trust Professor of Pediatrics: “Prior to these programs, doctors were taught how to cure diseases in children. He wanted to prevent disease. That meant families would bring babies to pediatricians when they reached a certain age, not when they reached a certain illness.”

In his 1975 book, Child Health and the Community, Haggerty discussed how pediatricians were vital in identifying the behavioral, emotional, and psychosocial problems that accompany — or sometimes cause — various health problems in children. He labeled these problems the “new morbidity,” and the term quickly entered the health professional lexicon. In 1982, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a statement on the “new morbidity,” defining the role of
pediatricians in addressing these issues; two years after that, the AAP elected Haggerty president. He served from 1984-1985.

After spending 11 years as department chair in Rochester, he returned to Boston Children’s Hospital — where he had spent much of his early career — to become the Roger Irving Lee Professor of Public Health at Harvard Medical School.

“Bob Haggerty really created new fields of study and concern in child health,” said James Perrin, M.D., Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and John C. Robinson Chair of Pediatrics at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children. “He changed the strategy from just treating infections to addressing diseases that are far more prominent today, such as asthma and obesity.” Perrin completed his residency and fellowship in Pediatrics at SMD, studying with Haggerty.

From 1978-1988, Haggerty was the senior program consultant and director of the General Pediatric Academic Development Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and starting in 1980, he served a 12-year stint as the president of the William T. Grant Foundation. Under his leadership, the foundation supported research on how school-age children cope with stress, and instituted the William T. Grant Scholars program as a response to sharp cuts in federal funding for social science research.

After his work with the William T. Grant Foundation, he returned to Rochester as Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics in 1992. He would spend the next eight years as executive director of the International Pediatric Association, and served as an editor for numerous academic journals, including the New England Journal of Medicine. He was founder and, for 25 years, editor-in-chief of Pediatrics in Review, the continuing education journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the largest publication devoted to pediatric continuing education in the world.

In 1998, Haggerty received the Howland Award, considered the most prestigious award in the field of pediatrics, from the American Pediatric Society.

“I cannot think of another pediatrician whose career has touched every aspect of pediatric practice, research, education, and service,” wrote Joel Alpert, M.D., Professor of Pediatrics and Public Health and Boston University, in Haggerty’s Howland Award nomination. “He is the Joe DiMaggio of pediatrics.”

In 2004, he received the Alfred I. du Pont award for Excellence in Children’s Health Care. That year, UR Medicine’s Golisano Children’s Hospital also dedicated the Robert J. Haggerty Child Health Services Research Laboratories in his honor.

Two years ago, Haggerty and his family, along with the family of Stanford Friedman, endowed the Haggerty-Friedman Professorship in Developmental/Behavioral Pediatric Research, an appointment currently held by Tristram Smith, M.D.
“He transformed Pediatric care and leaves an amazing legacy that is embodied in all we do in Pediatrics (and medical care in general). Nowhere is this better reflected than in our own institution and our commitment to patients and families,” said Patrick D. Brophy, M.D., William H. Eilinger Professor and Chair of the Department of Pediatrics, and Physician-in-Chief of the Golisano Children’s Hospital.

Haggerty was predeceased by his loving wife of 64 years, Muriel E. (Protzman) Haggerty. He is survived by his four children, Robert (Julie) Haggerty, Janet (Jim) Morris, Richard (Nancy) Haggerty, and John (Jennifer) Haggerty, along with 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A celebration of his life will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 1, at the Country Club of Rochester. In lieu of flowers, consider a contribution to the Haggerty/Friedman Fund at Golisano Children’s Hospital, 300 E. River Road, PO Box 278996, Rochester, NY 14627. This fund supports research and training in behavioral and developmental problems of children.