Symposium in Honor of Hilary Koprowski’s Scientific Achievements

It is my honor to write the forward for The Journal of Infectious Diseases supplement dedicated to Hilary Koprowski. Hilary Koprowski, MD, was a scientific force whose achievements in virology and immunology defined 20th-century science and saved numerous lives. During Koprowski’s time as director of The Wistar Institute from 1957 to 1991, Wistar reached international prominence for its vaccine research and first earned its designation as a National Cancer Institute–designated cancer center. A dynamic and larger-than-life figure, with a network of prominent scientists as well as industry and institute heads that stayed fiercely loyal to him, Koprowski found ways of trailblazing scientific inroads and helping solve some of the greatest health challenges of the time.

Koprowski had a great gift for identifying talent and bringing the best and brightest scientists together. Because of his leadership, Wistar developed vaccines against rubella (German measles) and rabies, and these vaccines are still the gold standard for preventing these once-devastating diseases. A distinguished virologist, Koprowski developed the first polio vaccine, which proved successful in clinical trials in Eastern Europe and the Belgium Congo. Koprowski’s eye for talent, coupled with his bold, charismatic personality, created a scientific synergy at Wistar that transformed science and helped shape the Institute into what it is today.

In addition to his reputation as a world-renowned scientist, Koprowski was also a talented pianist, who attended the Warsaw Conservatory of Music and graduated from the Santa Celia Conservatory of Music in Rome. This balance of scientific accomplishments and musical vitality gave him a confidence and persuasiveness to push boundaries as a vaccine pioneer. It also created a quality of life and culture at Wistar that attracted brilliant people who believed they would be successful with his support and leadership.

Call him a Renaissance man, a risk taker or a scientific wunderkind, Koprowski’s leadership and scientific acumen was transformational. Throughout his 3-decade career at Wistar, he demonstrated extraordinary direction and commitment. His contributions to The Wistar Institute drove cutting-edge research and discovery daily, keeping the Institute as relevant and vital as it was when it was founded in 1892.

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