



Gunther J. Hagen

IN MEMORIAM

1924–2003



GUNTHER J. HAGEN DIED on November 19, 2003, a few weeks before his 79th birthday, of metastatic adenocarcinoma of the distal esophagus. He was not a physician, but a medical technologist — or, in the new vernacular, a clinical laboratory scientist.

He made extraordinary contributions to the field of laboratory medicine in Sacramento for half a century, from his beginnings at PCL, Sacramento Clinical Laboratory, CBL, through assignments with Roche Biomedical Labs, Metpath, Metwest and Unilab. His passing is a significant loss to the local medical community.

Gunther Hagen was born in Berlin, Germany, on Christmas Day, 1924. His father was a successful investment banker. His family was of Jewish descent, and most members died during the Holocaust. Young Gunther spent his boyhood at a boarding school in Switzerland, and subsequently in a Swiss displaced persons' camp, until the end of World War II. He emigrated to New York City in 1948 where he worked as a printer.

He was drafted by the Air Force in 1950, at the start of the Korean War, and first worked in a clinical lab while stationed at Tachikawa Air Force Base in Japan. He ultimately became the non-commissioned officer in charge of the large Air Force hospital laboratory. It was in Tokyo that he met his wife, Kazuko. They were married in 1953 and after his discharge moved to Sacramento.

He participated in the development of many significant laboratory procedures over the next 40 years. These included serum protein electrophoresis and immunoelectrophoresis, radio-immunoassay and other immunochemical methods, toxicology and therapeutic drug monitoring tests.

During the last 10 years of his career, Mr. Hagen was a consultant to laboratory consumers; recommending appropriate tests, discussing abnormal laboratory data and lecturing to physicians, nurses and laboratory personnel. His lectures on the biochemical and serologic diagnosis of viral hepatitis were classics.

Those who knew and worked with Gunther will always remember his special knack for dealing with clients and wry sense of humor. Although he always let callers know he was not a physician, many clients treated him like a trusted colleague. They would often ask for him specifically as "the one with the accent."

He was a stickler for accuracy. He would often preface his explanation of some puzzling lab result with the words, "Let me put it this way," and proceed to make things clear. He was amused, and sometimes exasperated, by errors that crept into articles on laboratory medicine. Once, in an article on herpesviruses, he pointed out a sentence that referred to "lesions of the palette" instead of "palate" and shook his head, adding, "What a terrible disease for a painter to have."

Mr. Hagen's interests included symphonic and operatic music, theater and reading works on history and politics. He was fluent in English, German, French and studied Japanese.

He lived and breathed integrity, honesty and accountability and expected no less from his colleagues. While all those who knew and worked with him will sorely miss him, his legacy can be found in the many people whose lives he has touched both professionally and personally.

He is survived by his wife, four children, seven grandchildren and one great grandson.

— *the staff at Quest/Unilab, Sacramento*

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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