Eugene K. Harris, PhD (1927–1997)

Eugene K. Harris, PhD, long-time member of the AACC, died of prostate cancer on July 4 at his home in Madison, VA. Gene’s illustrious career was dedicated to improving the statistical analysis of data in the clinical laboratory, and he authored many pivotal papers and several books in the areas of analytical goals, reference values, within-person variation, serial laboratory measurements, multivariate analysis of laboratory data, and survival analysis. His work has played no small part in the education of virtually every clinical chemist regarding the best statistical approaches to use for clinical laboratory data analysis.

Born July 11, 1927, in New York City, Gene served for 28 years as Chief of the Laboratory of Applied Studies, Division of Computer Research and Technology, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD. After his retirement from NIH in 1983, he had been a Consultant in Clinical Statistics, as well as a Clinical Professor, Department of Pathology, and an Adjunct Professor, Division of Biostatistics, Department of Health Evaluation Sciences, at the University of Virginia Health Sciences Center in Charlottesville. For 3 years he was also Research Professor, Department of Biomedical Engineering, at the University. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from Trinity College, Hartford, CT, in 1946, and completed his doctorate in biostatistics and public health at Yale University in 1950. He taught biostatistics at the University of California–Berkeley for 2 years before accepting a position as Chief of Statistical Services at the Taft Sanitary Engineering Center of the US Public Health Service, Cincinnati, OH, where he served for 11 years. Before moving to NIH in 1965, he worked for 2 years as Senior Operations Analyst, Office of the Secretary, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, in Washington, DC. From 1973 to 1974, he was on research assignment at the Clinical Research Centre of the Medical Research Council, Harrow, Middlesex, UK.

His professional interests focused primarily on statistical consulting for the design and analysis of research projects and the development of statistical methods in clinical laboratory medicine. Gene was first attracted to laboratory medicine through his collaboration with the late Professor George Williams, whom he regarded as a mentor and friend. In this early work with Professor Williams, Gene pioneered the concepts of within- and between-person variability. His subsequent contributions in the area of biological and analytical variation led to principles for analytical goal-setting that have been widely adopted, not only in clinical chemistry, but throughout the discipline of laboratory medicine. He authored four books and >65 papers related to his field. His work had a worldwide impact on the recommended approaches for establishing reference values and their stratification, and on the evaluation of changes in serial laboratory results in an individual. Gene provided vital statistical input to various laboratory committees, both in the US and Europe, including the NCCLS Subcommittees on Reference Intervals and on Qualitative/Semi-Quantitative Testing. He also participated importantly in several conferences organized by the College of American Pathologists and was widely recognized for the importance of his work presented at the 1976 Aspen Conference on Analytical Goals in Clinical Chemistry.

He served as advisor to the International Federation for Clinical Chemistry Expert Panel on Reference Values and as a consultant to the Centre de Medecine Preventive, Nancy, France; to the Spanish Society for Clinical Chemistry; and to the US Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Devices and Radiological Health.

Gene was well-known for the extremely careful and diligent approach he took to any study with which he was associated. Each study he published was carried out with the utmost care and thought. In contrast with the statistician’s usual support role in research studies, Gene often took a lead role in a given study. Clinical chemists who did not know him missed the treat of watching his mind work as he was presented with a new problem. His grasp of both the laboratory problem at hand and the statistical approach needed to address it were remarkable and accounted for the prominence his studies achieved.

Gene served on the Board of Editors for Clinical Chemistry between 1980 and 1989 and was an often-used reviewer, known for both the depth of his reviews and the promptness with which he returned them. In 1995, he served as an Associate Editor and consultant to this journal for statistical papers. He was gifted as a clear and insightful writer, explaining complex concepts in simple terms. His body of writings, as outlined above, have had

Fig. 1. Dr. Eugene K. Harris.
a profound influence on the discipline of laboratory medicine.

Honored by many awards during his career, Gene was the first holder of a fellowship in statistics from the National Cancer Institute, from 1948 to 1950. He received a Silver Medal, Superior Service Award for Research in Statistics, from the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1963; the NIH Senior Scientific Service Outstanding Performance Award in 1982; and the Roe Award, Capital Section, AACC, for Outstanding Research Contributions in 1983.

He had been a member of the AACC since 1973; a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society, London; and a member of numerous other scientific societies, including the American Statistical Association, the Biometric Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Sigma Xi.

With all of his dedication to his profession, Gene was also a dedicated family man. He is survived by his wife of 47 years, Janet Schoepflin Harris; their three daughters, Barbara McWhirter of Cheshire, CT, Deborah Teall of Metuchen, NJ, and Nancy Harris of Kensington, MD; and three grandchildren.

All those who remember him, his sparkling intellect, and his genial personality will miss him. As one of his nonmathematician neighbors said of him, “He could give numbers a good name.”

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