

Eloise R. (Elo) Giblett, M.D.
1921-2009

Dr. Eloise (Elo) Giblett, a pioneer in the field of hematology and president of ASHG in 1973, passed away on September 16, 2009.

Elo discovered the first immunodeficiency disease: adenosine deaminase (ADA) deficiency. She identified and characterized many blood group antigens and thus was instrumental to the emergence of red cell transfusion as a safe and efficacious procedure. She creatively applied her understanding of red cell protein polymorphisms to genetic linkage analyses, was senior author on the paper that demonstrated the feasibility of unrelated marrow transplantation for leukemia, and was an early and forceful proponent of marrow donation. She was elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences in 1980 and was an inspiration to all of us.

Elo was born in Tacoma, Washington in 1921. She graduated from the University of Washington in 1942, and initially worked as a technician in clinical microbiology. During World War II (1944-1946), she served in the U.S. Navy as a member of the WAVES (a corps of women nurses and other medical support personnel). This experience convinced her to attend medical school and she graduated with honors from the University of Washington School of Medicine in 1951. Elo was a resident at the King County Hospital (now Harborview) and then a Hematology fellow, one of the first in our division, with Dr. Clem Finch. In 1955, she joined the Hematology faculty as a clinical associate in Medicine and advanced in rank to Clinical Professor. From 1967 until her retirement in 1987, she was a research professor.

Throughout her research career, she was based at the Puget Sound Blood Center, where she served as head of Immunogenetics (1955-1979) and then as executive director (1980-1987). She thoughtfully and effectively dealt with the unexpected consequences of the AIDS epidemic on blood banking, defining policy on how to screen donors before HIV was identified and specific assays were available.

Elo's research contributions are extensive. In 1956, she and Dr. Clem Finch published on seminal work showing that one could quantitate the lifespan of red cells in the circulation by labeling iron and observing its incorporation into hemoglobin and persistence in red cells. Using this method, they demonstrated that red cell lifespan is shortened by hemolysis. Her 200 publications include many other significant contributions, including the identification of red cell antigens defining the Le, Js, and many other blood groups; descriptions of the physiology of Rh and i; and the characterization of transferrin and haptoglobin. She was interested in how red cell antigens could be used to study genetic variation among ethnic and racial groups and as linkage markers of disease inheritance. Many of her studies focused on red cell enzymopathies.

*Excerpted from a tribute to Dr. Giblett by
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