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Dr. William G. Figueroa, 66; linked chemical to cancer.

**By Rusty Pray
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William G. Figueroa, 66, a pulmonary specialist who published a seminal medical report linking lung cancer in humans with exposure to a specific chemical, died Monday of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, at his home in West Chester.

Born in Camden and raised in Merchantville, Camden County, Dr. Figueroa had been a longtime resident of Penn Valley before moving to West Chester three years ago.

In 1973, Dr. Figueroa, at the time chief of pulmonary medicine at Germantown Hospital, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* the first report directly connecting lung cancer with exposure to chloromethyl methyl ether (CME) and a contaminant contained in it, bis-chloromethyl ether (BCME).

In his report, Dr. Figueroa documented 14 Rohm & Haas workers who developed lung cancer as a result of exposure to the chemical. Later studies arrived at a figure of 54 employees at the company's Bridesburg plant who died of pulmonary disease due to exposure.

The report, considered a landmark in occupational medicine, led to the elimination of exposing industrial workers to CME, once used in some ion-exchange manufacturing processes. CME is now classified by the Environmental Protection Agency as a human carcinogen.

In a 1975 *Inquirer* article, Dr. Figueroa was called a hero by Rohm & Haas employees and their families affected by exposure to the chemical.



Over the years, he published a number of other research papers dealing with cardiopulmonary disease, and he continued to champion the cause of patients with chronic lung disease.

Colleagues said he had a reputation for being able to diagnose difficult illnesses that other physicians could not.

As good as he was in the science of his field, Dr. Figueroa also knew how to treat human beings once they came into his care.

Donald D. Peterson, a longtime partner of Dr. Figueroa's, said the doctor "taught other doctors that the practice of medicine involved making important decisions about people, not 'cases.' "

"Again and again, I heard from patients that he not only helped them to breathe better, but that he changed their lives," Peterson said.

A graduate of Merchantville High School, Dr. Figueroa earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Pennsylvania in 1957. He received his medical degree from Hahnemann Medical School in 1961 before performing an internship and residency at the old Philadelphia General Hospital, and a fellowship at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Philadelphia.

He was chief of pulmonary and critical-care medicine at Lankenau Hospital from 1980 to 1996, and he was a clinical professor of medicine at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital from 1983 until his retirement in 2000.

He belonged to several professional organizations, including holding national offices with the American Lung Association and the American Thoracic Society.

His work was recognized numerous times, including in 1974 by the Industrial Medical Association. The group gave Dr. Figueroa its highest award for a medical article on his work in exposing CME as a human carcinogen.

Dr. Figueroa is survived by his wife of 42 years, Eileen; a son, David; a daughter, Dolores Verdeur; his father, William C.; three sisters; and one brother.

A Funeral Mass will be said at 11 a.m. tomorrow at SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, 1325 Boot Rd., West Chester. Friends may call at 10 a.m. Burial will be in SS. Peter and Paul Cemetery, Marple Township.

Memorial donations may be made to the ALS Association of Greater Philadelphia, 500 Office Center Dr., Suite 340, Fort Washington, Pa. 19034.

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