In Memoriam: Theodore Leon Munsat, MD (1930-2013)

Theodore Leon Munsat, MD, died on November 22, 2013, after a long illness that included a series of small strokes. He was 83 years old. Ted grew up in Vermont and considered it home throughout his life. He was buried in the town of Rutland.

He left home to do undergraduate work in Michigan and then returned to Burlington for medical school at the University of Vermont. He trained in neurology at The Neurological Institute of Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in New York, New York. In 1963, after 2 years in the US Navy, he moved to the University of California, Los Angeles, where he did pioneering work in neuromuscular disease and muscle histochemistry with Carl Pearson, MD. He ran the neuromuscular unit at the University of Southern California from 1970 to 1974. After a sabbatical in Newcastle, England, he came to Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, Massachusetts, as chairman of neurology in 1976. He was an active and vocal opponent of the United States’ involvement in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era. He took a similar stance during the buildup to the Iraq War after September 11, 2001.

At Tufts, he quickly built an outstanding department by recruiting faculty members who would soon gain prominence, including Walter Bradley, DM, FRCP, Michael Pessin, MD, John Growdon, MD, John Kelly, MD, and others. He continued his clinical work centered mainly on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. In 1982, he stepped down as chair but continued his active research program.

His colleagues at Tufts remember him with great fondness as a devoted and empathic doctor, colleague, teacher, and friend. One self-confessed “myoneophyte” described Ted’s time at Tufts as one of high visibility for the neurology department with easy access to his very helpful consultations. Ted is remembered for his devotion to his patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—people often seen by others as incurable and beyond help. Ted disagreed. He worked to improve their individual lives through symptom management, soothing counseling, and research. He was an early proponent of the need for translational research in neurology and collaborated with the Tufts Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging in this work.

Ted had a deep interest in graduate medical education. He was a cofounder of Continuum, the American Academy of Neurology’s continuing education program. After his retirement, he worked actively in the World Federation of Neurology. A major goal of the World Federation of Neurology is “to foster quality neurology and brain health worldwide, a goal we seek to achieve by promoting global neurological education and training, with the emphasis placed firmly on underresourced parts of the world.”

Ted was the first author on an article describing this worldwide initiative in 2009. A more detailed description of the experience in Latin America was published in 2010.

He was elected president of the American Academy of Neurology in 1987 and served until 1989. Among his many professional recognitions were the A.B. Baker Award for Medical Education from the American Academy of Neurology, the Sheila Essey Award for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis research, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the World Federation of Neurology Research Group on Neuromuscular Disease.

Ted was a dyed-in-the-wool Vermonter. He had vacation homes in Vermont where he spent as much time as possible. He tapped his maple trees to produce his signature Munsat Brand maple syrup while under the watchful eyes of his grazing sheep.

He had great enthusiasm for life, telling his wife that every day was a new adventure. He was an avid sailor and skier. He made wooden furniture for his Vermont home. In his 70s, he spent 4 months in Paris to improve his French. For most of his life, he was remarkably healthy and energetic.

He is survived by his wife Carla, children Peter and Amy and their spouses, and 5 grandchildren.


Author Affiliations: Department of Neurology, Tufts Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts.
Corresponding Author: David E. Thaler, MD, PhD, Department of Neurology, Tufts Medical Center, 800 Washington St, PO Box 314, Boston, MA 02111 (dthaler@tuftsmedicalcenter.org).
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