

Robert L. Comis: In Memoriam

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Robert L. (Bob) Comis, M.D., passed away suddenly on May 10, 2017. The oncology community remembers with great affection his many contributions to our field. Dr. Comis was a medical oncologist who made major advances in the treatment of lung cancer, from the time he was the director of clinical research in that field in the extramural program of the National Cancer Institute (NCI) until his more recent involvement in facilitating the implementation of personalized medicine studies through international initiatives. As Group Co-Chair of ECOG-ACRIN and President of the Coalition of Cancer Cooperative Groups, Bob was a tireless advocate for a system that used public resources to address important research questions not answerable by other means. Dr. Comis knew better than anyone how to make the complex ecosystem of NCI-funded cancer clinical trials work for both researchers and patients. He succeeded because of his ability to inspire others with his important ideas, his straightforward approach, and his willingness to take on difficult challenges.

Bob attended Fordham University and received his M.D. from the State University of New York (SUNY) in Syracuse, New York. His commitment to clinical research in cancer preceded even his training as an oncologist, when he accepted an assignment to work at the NCI's Chemotherapy Unit in Kampala, Uganda, under the direction of Paul Carbone. There he had firsthand experience in providing remarkably effective chemotherapy for Burkitt lymphoma, an epidemic malignancy in children discovered a few years earlier by Dennis Burkitt. From 1972 to 1974, he was a staff associate at the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Therapy Evaluation Program and the NCI-Veteran's Administration Medical Oncology Branch. It was there that he saw the potential for marshalling the resources of the NCI's investigational drug branch to change cancer treatment through combined-modality clinical trials. After a fellowship at what is now the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, Dr. Comis embarked on a career of building centers of excellence in the research and treatment of cancer. In 1976, he left Boston for Syracuse to become the Chief of the Solid Tumor Oncology Service at SUNY Health Science Center. In 1984, Bob moved to Philadelphia to become the Chair of Medical Oncology at the Fox Chase Cancer Center. He held numerous leadership roles at Fox Chase, including Cancer Center Medical Director, Director

of Clinical Research, and Vice President of Medical Science. In these positions, he embraced the model of bringing the experimental therapies to cancer patients through the medium of well-designed clinical trials. This approach accelerated the development of numerous drugs and combination therapies that are the backbone of treatment regimens to this day and, as importantly, also established the system whereby advances in biology of cancer could impact therapy most effectively.

Bob championed the cause of practice-changing, publicly funded cancer clinical research during nearly 4 decades of work in the cancer cooperative groups. From 1979 to 1984 he served as Chair of the Respiratory Disease Committee of Cancer and Leukemia Group B. After moving to Fox Chase, Bob assumed prominent roles in the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG). In addition to his contributions to the ECOG Lung Cancer Committee, he served on the Executive Committee and as Associate Group Chair for Laboratory Studies. In 1995, Bob was elected to succeed Doug Tormey as Group Chair of ECOG. In this role, he set out to expand therapeutic opportunities from academic centers out into the community, where most patients with cancer are treated. He fostered the involvement of community oncologists in the leadership of the Cooperative Group. For the first time in such studies, he involved individual patients and advocates in the design and conduct of cancer clinical trials. The resulting broad adoption of clinical trials and scientific endpoints led to the completion of several large-scale trials in common tumors, including lung, colon, and breast cancers.

Bob's tenure as ECOG Group Chair saw tremendous changes in the field of oncology, and under his leadership, ECOG made a great number of practice-defining contributions to multidisciplinary cancer care. In 2012, with the vision of moving to more biomarker-driven cancer clinical research, Bob partnered with Mitchell Schnall, M.D., Ph.D., of the American College of Radiology Imaging Network (ACRIN) to create a clinical trials group known as ECOG-ACRIN. The new group, co-chaired by Bob and Mitch, dramatically expanded the capabilities of publicly funded cancer clinical research, particularly in the challenging areas of early cancer detection and precision oncology. In recognition of the biomarker-driven science already implemented in cooperative group trials, the National



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Cancer Institute looked to ECOG-ACRIN to lead its large genomic study for drugs targeting molecular drivers across multiple cancers types, NCI-Molecular Analysis for Therapy Choice (NCI-MATCH). Dr. Comis led the design, implementation, and conduct of this trial.

In each of his leadership roles, Dr. Comis took delight in seeing others succeed and was recognized for fostering scientific inquiry among early-career oncologists. He was a tireless advocate for gender- and race/ethnicity-equality and opportunity in the cancer research enterprise, both to bring therapeutic opportunities to underserved populations and to promote the diversity of the next generation of oncologists. Many of his trainees and mentees are the new leaders in the field and will ensure that his work will continue.

Bob was a trusted friend and confidant to so many, and those of us who had the good fortune to know him will greatly miss his wit and enthusiasm. He knew how to combine a career dedicated to fighting a deadly disease with the elements of a rewarding life. Centered in an accomplished and diverse family, Bob had a great variety of interests. He shared with colleagues his recipes for nocino (start the walnuts soaking on June 24th—Saint John the Baptist's Day) and Christmas Eve baccula (use

the thinnest salt cod you can find). A trip to a scientific meeting for Bob was not complete without a detour to a museum, an art gallery, or an outstanding local restaurant. He was a talented pianist in several genres; he could sit down at any piano and raise the roof with jazz, rock, or classical renditions and was always working on a new composition. Bob also embraced a new artistic direction a few years ago when he took up painting, and he rapidly developed into an accomplished visual artist. He read extensively, sharing enthusiasm for current novelists and poets, and was ready to defend their merits to those who might be less enthused. Because Bob knew how to share his experiences, the freshness and depth of his cultural existence enriched those who lived and worked with him.

Our thoughts are especially with his wife, Ginny Martin, and his children, Larisa, Bob, Anthony, Peter, and Julia—his family was constantly in his conversation, central to his identity, and a source of great love and pride. We hope the high regard in which we, his colleagues, held him will sustain them in the months and years to come.

Bob Comis enriched the lives of his patients, his trainees, and his colleagues in countless ways, and we are grateful for his life and legacy.

