Cardiovascular Pioneer William B. Kannel Dies

MED prof’s research led to new understanding of cardiovascular health

By Art Jahnke

WILLIAM B. KANNEL, whose work with the Framingham Heart Study spanned nearly 30 years and helped launch a revolution in medicine, died on August 20, 2011. He was 87 years old.

Kannel, a professor emeritus of medicine and of public health at the School of Medicine, was director of the multigenerational epidemiological study from 1966 to 1979. The research identified or confirmed many risk factors for heart disease, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, diabetes, smoking, and obesity.

A cardiovascular epidemiologist, Kannel joined the Framingham Heart Study in 1951. The study, begun in 1948 by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health and run by BU since 1971 under NIH contract, sought to identify causes of cardiovascular disease by following the health and lifestyles of 5,000 residents of Framingham, Mass. It currently follows 14,000 people, almost all of them descendants of the original cohort. Between 1979 and 1987, Kannel was the University’s principal investigator with the study and later worked as a senior investigator.

Karen Antman, dean of MED and provost of the Medical Campus, describes Kannel as the founder of the field of preventive cardiology. “His work has instructed generations of physicians in the prevention of heart attacks and stroke,” says Antman. “He was an intellectual giant, but also very humble and a thorough gentleman who was loved by all his colleagues and greatly respected by his peers.”

Kannel published more than 600 medical articles, numerous editorials, and book chapters in premier texts. He also identified risk factors for sudden death, heart failure, and peripheral artery disease.

In 1971, three decades before the completion of the Human Genome Project, Kannel began recruiting a second generation of Framingham Heart Study participants, known as the Framingham offspring cohort. The new bigenerational design helped to identify family patterns of cardiovascular disease. His research on two generations of Framingham participants provided pathbreaking epidemiological observations to identify smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol as key risk factors for heart attacks and strokes,” he says. “He was an intellectual giant, but also very humble and a thorough gentleman who was loved by all his colleagues and greatly respected by his peers.”

Kannel was a recipient of numerous national and international awards and honorary degrees, including the American Heart Association’s Distinguished Scientist Award (2006), the Lifetime Achievement Award from the New York Academy of Medicine (2006), and the American Society for Preventive Cardiology Joseph Stokes Award (2011).

He served on the editorial board of many scientific journals, including *Hypertension*, the *American Journal of Cardiology*, and the *American Heart Journal*.