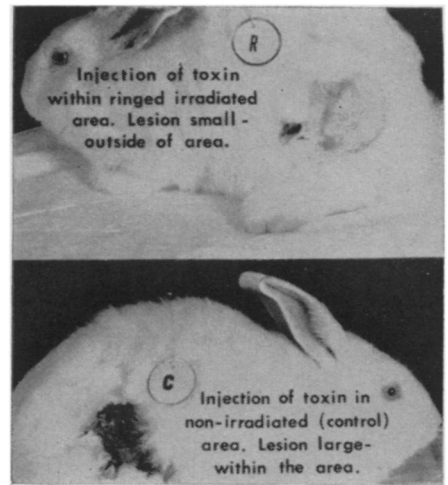




Dr. Kahn at 81: research enriches.



Spirochete, found by Kahn test.



Radiation breaks local defense.

Research is forever

At an age when the average person has retired, a dedicated researcher looks ahead

by Faye Marley

When Dr. Reuben L. Kahn—famed for the syphilis test that replaced the Wassermann test in 1923—was brought to this country from his birthplace in Kovno, Lithuania, at the age of 12, he looked forward to becoming a doctor of medicine—a physician who made people well.

It was not until he completed his sophomore year as a medical student at Valparaiso University in Indiana that he seriously considered giving up this dream and turning to research. He reasoned that he still could serve people—perhaps many thousands more of them—through research.

At 81, when most men would have their accomplishments behind them, he is still an eager researcher.

For 40 years, from 1928 to 1968, Dr. Kahn was associated with the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. He says when he became professor emeritus at 70, the age when all good men are expected to give up their active duties, he soon began to get younger. Students who had bidden him good-bye turned to find him hard at work, under the sponsorship of the Atomic Energy Commission, in a university laboratory.

From 1957 to 1967 he worked on tissue immunity in relation to radiation under the Atomic Energy Commission. Currently his research is being supported by the American Cancer Society. In July 1968 he accepted the invitation of Howard University in Washington,

D.C., to become research professor of microbiology. In this cosmopolitan but predominantly Negro institution, young scientists work under his guidance.

Trim and slight of figure, with sparkling brown eyes and alert manner, he soon makes acquaintances forget his age. He could well rest on his laurels: He received an honorary M.D. degree as late as 1963 from the University of Greece in Athens, and in 1964 a Ph.D. from the Far Eastern University in Manila. The Michigan State Legislature in a joint convention on April 14, 1931, gave him a citation: "For the ideals which have motivated his endeavors and have caused him to accept in satisfaction of his work a knowledge of service to humanity rather than of material reward." He earned an M.S. degree at Yale and a D.Sc. at New York University.

In 1966 at the Hebrew University Hadassah Medical School in Jerusalem, Israel, the Reuben L. Kahn Research Laboratory of Immunology was established. That same year the Kahn Laboratory at the University of Teheran Medical School, Iran, and the Reuben L. Kahn Research Laboratory at the University of Isfahan Medical School in Isfahan, Iran, were founded. In 1967, the Incarnate Word College, San Antonio, Tex., established a Reuben L. Kahn Research Award for the best paper presented at its annual research conferences.

Dr. Kahn prefers to be known as an immunologist, despite his fame in the field of the serology of syphilis. The serology work, begun in 1920, established principles of precipitation that led to the development of the Kahn test and other serologic procedures, including the universal serologic reaction which has aided in clarifying blood diagnostic reactions with lipid antigen.

He developed the Kahn precipitation test as a by-product of his work on the Wassermann reaction, which he realized was time-consuming and not quite accurate. The serum in the Kahn test is inactivated as in the Wassermann test, but the entire procedure takes much less than an hour and is considered by scientists to be the first really accurate test for syphilis. It is still in use in many parts of the world, including the U.S.S.R. In the United States, the U.S. Public Health Service has adopted a simplified test built on his method.

He never patented or commercialized the Kahn test, although it would have made him a wealthy man. His research was almost without expense because he used leftover blood samples when he was Immunologist in the Michigan Department of Public Health in charge of the Wassermann Laboratory. This work included the daily analysis of several hundred specimens of blood. One night in the lab, after two years of working with the leftovers, he discovered the key reaction that led to the Kahn test.

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Important though this test proved to be, Dr. Kahn regards his research on tissue immunity as more basic and perhaps, eventually, more important.

He uses rabbits in his immunity research to demonstrate his theories on the localization of infection by radiation.

"Something about radiation has broken down the natural mechanics that localize diseases, or, rather, any foreign protein," he explains. "Consequently, antitoxin injected into the radiated areas escapes quickly, neutralizes the diphtheria toxin at large in the system, and saves the rabbit.

"I got the idea back in 1930 after studying a hemolytic streptococcus infection in my own throat," he explains. "I noticed that the infection was localized in two small areas, and I pondered why they did not spread all over the throat. The answer must be that the streptococci were so strongly localized in the area where they established a foothold that they were unable to spread."

The localization phenomenon has not been studied exclusively by other workers. In fact, Dr. Kahn has found only one textbook that lists localization in its index.

Like most scientists, Dr. Kahn is cautious about expressing his hopes for ultimate success with his theories. But one senses that he would go contentedly to rest like some modern man of La Mancha if his experiments might end in a cure for a disease that so far has baffled investigators.

He tells students that brilliance is not essential to carry on research, but that incentive and dedication are. Whatever one's native ability, as he keeps working from day to day on a given problem, he will inevitably acquire a deeper understanding of that problem.

"I was far from a brilliant student in college," he says. "But a number of far more brilliant students than I accomplished relatively little in their careers because they lacked incentives.

"We live in an era of research," he says. "It keeps the philosopher absorbed in thought about the nature of man. It keeps the chemist absorbed in the nature of molecules, the physicist in the behavior of electrons, the bacteriologist in the behavior of germs, the sociologist in the behavior of man. . . . In all these varied and innumerable fields, men and women are enriching life by devotion to research."

Dr. Kahn lives alone in an apartment hotel in Washington, D.C. His wife of more than half a century has died and his son and daughter are married, but the riches of research—his ongoing quest for knowledge—are companions in a busy old age. ◇

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