Sydney M. Finegold

An article written by Sydney M. Finegold in 2011 entitled, “A little kid from Far Rockway grows up” (1) would have been more appropriately entitled, “A little kid from Far Rockway grows up and becomes a giant among scientists.” However, those who have interacted with Dr. Finegold over his incredibly productive and distinguished career in Infectious Diseases and Clinical Microbiology know that he would never describe himself in this manner. They also know full well that there is a great deal more to “Sid” than his considerable professional achievements and contributions. Most notably, Dr. Finegold is truly a gentleman, and even more appropriately, a gentle man.

Dr. Finegold received his A.B. degree from the University of California in bacteriology in 1943, and his M.D. degree from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston in 1949. Of note, it was in medical school that he decided it would be important to study the impact of antimicrobial agents on bowel flora. Dr. Finegold, his wife, also a medical student at that time, and another classmate took various antimicrobials and provided stool specimens for study, resulting in publication of their results (2) – his first venture into the world of bowel flora! He completed an internship with the U.S. Public Health Service Internal Medicine at Galveston, and then moved to the University of Minnesota Medical School for residency in internal medicine from 1950 to 1952. During this period, he also applied his training in microbiology as part of rotations at the Minneapolis Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital. In his third year, he was called back into military service, and subsequently returned to Los Angeles where his family lived. Thus, in 1953-54, Dr. Finegold launched his long and distinguished
academic medicine career at the UCLA School of Medicine and the Wadsworth VA Hospital, Los Angeles, where he subsequently became Professor of Medicine in 1968, Professor of Microbiology and Immunology from 1983 to 1997, and Professor, Microbiology, Immunology and Molecular Genetics from 1983 to present. In December, 1953, he began training with William Hewitt, a clinical infectious diseases physician from whom Dr. Finegold says he not only learned infectious diseases, but also learned a good deal about life and how to be a gentleman. Over the course of his career, he held the position of Chief, Chest and Infectious Disease Sections (1957 to 1961), Chief, Infectious Disease Section (1961-1986), Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development (1985-1992), and Staff Physician, Infectious Disease section (1992 to present). He became Emeritus Professor of Medicine, Microbiology, Immunology and Molecular Genetics, and Staff Physician, Infectious Disease Section in 2000.

Dr. Finegold has been described by those who have worked with him over the years as tireless with unlimited energy…..Diane Citron worked with him in his Wadsworth laboratory from 1974 to 1983, “Dr. Finegold was inspiring, indefatigable, and always on the lookout for the unusual and unexpected, and encouraged his fellows and colleagues to do the same, whether it involved Legionnaires Disease, *Clostridium difficile* or any manner of anaerobic infections in between. Working within his group was a life-defining experience for me.” Of note, he still plays tennis at least weekly at the age of 91!

He has received numerous awards and honors during his long and productive career including Fellow, American Academy of Microbiology, Fellow, Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), and Fellowship in the American Association for
Science and the American College of Physicians, of which he became Master in 1987.

Notably, he joined an organizational meeting in 1961 to form an official national society for infectious diseases. Through these efforts, he became a charter member for the IDSA in 1963. He also founded the Anaerobe Society of the Americas, VA Society of Practitioners in Infectious Diseases, and the Society of Microbial Ecology and Disease.

In addition, he received the first Annual Alexander Sonnenwirth Memorial Lectureship through the American Society for Microbiology (ASM), the first Annual Outstanding Teacher of the Year Award in Medicine, Wadsworth VA Hospital, the Hoechst Roussel Award from the ASM and the American Academy of Microbiology (AAM), and the Becton Dickinson and Company Award in Clinical Microbiology, Division C award from the ASM and AAM, to name only a few!

The name, Sydney Finegold, is synonymous worldwide with anaerobic microbiology. As noted by Ellen Jo Baron, “A major benefit of working with Sid was hosting the numerous international scholars who flocked to our research laboratory to learn the latest science on anaerobes. Sid supported many activities that were not part of anyone’s original plans. Julie Downes was one such brilliant, young microbiologist from Australia who first noticed a strangely vigorous catalase test on a small gram-negative rod from appendices. Sid enthusiastically sponsored her to go to Marilyn Roberts’ laboratory in Seattle and learn how to perform DNA melt curves for species differentiation. This activity resulted in our discovering and naming Bilophila wadsworthia, after which Sid’s laboratory went on to characterize and name numerous other anaerobes. Typical of Sid, when we wanted to name the bug after him, he declined, saying that the Wadsworth lab needed a bug other than Legionella, especially an
anaerobe, for which the lab was most known. We are all happy that now Sid not only has
a species (Alistipes finegoldii), but a genus (Finegoldia) named after him.” Over the
years, his research has been primarily focused on anaerobic bacteria and their infections
as well as the make up of bowel flora and its role in disease. His work has dealt with the
role of anaerobes in a variety of infections such as various pleuropulmonary infections
including aspiration pneumonia, lung abscesses and pleural empyema, in skin and soft
tissue infections in intravenous drug users, in wound infections following head and neck
surgery, and in chronic bacterial maxillary sinusitis. Although ‘retiring’ in 2000, even
today at the age of 91, Dr. Finegold continues his contributions to medical research with
his work on the role of anaerobic bacteria in autism, which he feels has been the most
satisfying for him. During the course of this distinguished career, Dr. Finegold authored
392 research papers, 118 review articles, 39 books and monographs, and 201 book
chapters.

It is fitting to conclude with the words of Dr. Finegold, “The research is fun and exciting,
but what makes it very special is the bright, young people who have worked with me and
taught me so much……I am also indebted to the many outstanding collaborators I have
been blessed to work with over the years, many too many to mention. They have added
immeasurably to the work of the laboratory and they have enriched my life. It is
remarkable that in academia one can have a personal family such as I have and have had
a second family of mentors, students, and colleagues” (1).

REFERENCES
1. Finegold, S.M. 2011. A little kid from Far Rockaway grows up. The Bulletin of
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