

In Memoriam: Robert M. Stern



Robert "Bob" M. Stern
June 18, 1937–June 13, 2020.

Robert M. Stern, 83, of State College, Pennsylvania, died on Saturday, June 13, 2020. He is survived by his wife of 59 years, Wilma Olch Stern, and his daughters Jessica Leigh Benjamin and her husband, Eric Benjamin, of West Newton, Massachusetts; Alison Rachel Stern and her husband, Amoshaun Toft, of Seattle, Washington; and his sister, Janice Victor of Montclair, New Jersey.

He was born in New York City on June 18, 1937, the son of Ervin Stern and Nellie Wachstetter Stern. He attended The Bronx High School of Science and earned his B.A. in Philosophy at Franklin & Marshall College, an M.A. at Tufts University, and Ph.D. at Indiana University, Bloomington, both in Psychology. After completing his doctorate with R.C. Davis, he spent two years as a Research Associate at Indiana University and then continued his career in Psychophysiology at the Department of Psychology at Penn State until 2005. In 1992, he was named a Distinguished Professor of Psychology. He was a highly productive researcher, a Ph.D. mentor to over 35 graduate students, a recognized undergraduate teacher, and an academic administrator.

His research focused on the autonomic nervous system, especially on the validation and development of electrogastrography, a non-invasive electrophysiological technique used to record gastric myoelectrical activity. Electrogastrography has become an internationally used technique for the study of the mechanisms and

management of gastrointestinal functioning including symptoms of nausea and gastroparesis. His research and publications were conducted with numerous students and two close colleagues with whom he worked for many years, Kenneth L. Koch, MD., Professor of Medicine in the Section on Gastroenterology and Hepatology now at Wake Forest University School of Medicine, and Professor William J. Ray of Penn State University. *Biofeedback*, by Stern and Ray, received the National Media Award by the American Psychological Foundation. They were also the primary authors of *Psychophysiological Recording*, for many years the basic text for this field. With Dr. Koch, he wrote the *Handbook of Electrogastrography*, and, after his retirement, *Nausea: Mechanisms and Management*. For several years, he held grants from NASA for the study of space motion sickness.

Bob was a universally beloved mentor and teacher. In graduate mentoring, his unassuming, inclusive, and nurturing style created space for students from wide and diverse backgrounds to find their own voices and chart their own paths. He emphasized and instilled simplicity, creativity, compassion, and resourcefulness. He was fond of often repeating to those in his orbit a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." A common rite of passage for students in their first semester of graduate school with Bob was to restore and operate an ancient and failing Grass polygraph (without aid from him or other students). Covered in ink and bleary-eyed by the end, this was a defining event for many, and it provided a first sense of empowerment and self-efficacy in graduate training that Bob continued to stoke. Those who were fortunate enough to be a teaching assistant or take one of his courses still practice and emulate what they saw in Bob as a teacher: patience, clarity, empathy, respect, open-mindedness, and a boundless sense of wonder at the ability of young minds to challenge you and stimulate new ideas.

His research was recognized by being granted the Award for Distinguished Scientific Contribution to Psychophysiology by the Society for Psychophysiological Research (SPR) in 2004. In the SPR presentation, Niels Birbaumer described Bob Stern as follows: "a pioneer whose contributions paved the way for the development of Behavioral Medicine and Social Cognitive Psychophysiology. Robert Stern's textbooks educated and inspired countless students worldwide for psychophysiology and shaped a positive and critical attitude of the public toward our discipline. Robert Stern has been an active member of our society for more than 40 years, serving on the board and several committees, and is a brilliant scientist and an adviser on ethical and social-political issues."

In 2005, Bob was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the International Electrogastrography Society. His experience with

electrogastrograms (EGGs) extended to his training with R.C. Davis at Indiana. Through serendipity, the Chair of the Department of Psychology at Penn State met Ken Koch, a newly appointed assistant professor in gastroenterology at Penn State's College of Medicine in Hershey. Many research questions about the meaning of the EGG signal quickly sparked a collaborative relationship that spanned almost 40 years. The long and fruitful collaboration brought out the gastroenterologist in Bob and the psychologist in Ken and resulted in many graduate students with strong interdisciplinary training. Many of Bob's 250 publications were devoted to the topic of gastric motility and its responsiveness to psychological factors. Topics ranged from the nausea of motion sickness evoked by illusory self-motion (the infamous rotating drum with black and white vertical stripes) to the study of a long list of other forms of nausea: nausea (and disgust) during sham feeding cold tofu dogs, nausea and pain during the cold pressor test, nausea of pregnancy, nausea in patients with bulimia, nausea in patients with functional dyspepsia and with diabetic, idiopathic, ischemic, and obstructive gastroparesis, just to name few. Together, they helped simplify the recording and analysis of the EGG signal and brought electrogastrography into clinical research and clinical applications in gastroenterology. Bob was always an open-minded but critical thinker whose courage, honesty, and perseverance in pursuing truth through research were inspirational for those from many different disciplines who came to know him.

From 1978 to 1987, Bob served as the Head of the Department of Psychology at Penn State University. During that time, he organized the Department's Committee for Minority Graduate Students. His efforts led to grants from NIH, NASA, and NSF to train minority high school, undergraduate, and graduate students. The Department has been nationally recognized for these programs. Widely travelled, he received Fulbright and DAAD awards and was a visiting professor at the University of London, Simon Fraser University, University of Vienna, the Universities of Mainz and Tübingen, the Athens Naval Hospital, and Wake Forest University.

For many years, Bob, as he was known to one and all, served on the Board of Strawberry Fields, a non-profit provider of community-based services for individuals with developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, and mental illness. In his honor, the Board,

many relatives, and friends established the Robert M. Stern Fund, for grants and loans to benefit staff.

Having grown up within a block of Yankee Stadium, Bob was an avid fan who often watched Yankees games with friends from "tar beach," the roof of his apartment building. His last book, Joe DiMaggio, Joe DiMaggio, describes his adventures growing up in The Bronx and his college years at Franklin & Marshall.

Bob Stern will be missed by the gastroenterology and psychophysiology communities for his pioneering work related to the study of nausea, gastric myoelectrical activity, gastric dysrhythmias, and electrogastrography methods. His influence on these fields will continue to live on through the students he mentored and their students.

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