Myron Ezra Wegman didn’t pin his reputation on 1 brilliant piece of research or a single striking policy achievement. But his friends and longtime colleagues could easily tell you 2 important things about him: he significantly advanced the cause of public health both in the United States and around the world, particularly for mothers and children; and, to the discomfiture of friends, colleagues, and family, he was an incorrigible grammatical stickler in conversation and in writing. Wegman died April 14, 2004, at the age of 95. His life was characterized by an unshakable commitment to humanity, a meticulous intellect, a sunny temperament, and a spirit of adventure.

BEGINNINGS

Born in Brooklyn in 1908 to Polish and Lithuanian Jewish parents, Wegman began his career during a transition period in public health, when dramatic advances had been achieved by improvements in water and food sanitation and immunization against some of the deadliest infectious diseases, such as smallpox and diphtheria.

After earning a degree in classics from City College of New York in 1928, Wegman completed medical training at the Yale University School of Medicine in 1932, planning to be a clinical pediatrician. But while waiting for a fellowship at Yale, he took a job with the State of Maryland, in a new position that had been created and funded under the newly enacted Social Security Act. It entailed acting as a medical “circuit rider,” bringing modern pediatric principles to doctors and their poor White and African American patients along Maryland’s Eastern Shore. During this period, Wegman also earned his master of public health degree from the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health and taught courses there in 1940 and 1941.

It was the dawning of the antibiotic Golden Age, and public health practitioners were turning their attention to the effects of social factors such as poverty on the health of communities. In the ensuing decades, Wegman was a major force in shifting the focus of pediatrics to child development, chronic illnesses, and behavioral issues. Wegman’s relentless efforts to improve prenatal care and reduce infant mortality led to great progress in child health around the world.

“Wegman had little interest in public health per se” when he began his career in Maryland, says Anne Wallis, director of the Iowa Center for Evaluation Research, who recorded an extensive oral history with Wegman in 1998. But Wegman had been nudged toward medicine by reading Sinclair Lewis’s novel Arrowsmith, the tale of a young doctor’s struggle to choose between a lucrative clinical practice and pure research for the benefit of all. According to Wegman’s son David, dean of the School of Health and Environment at the University of Massachusetts–Lowell, the prospect of “not hanging out a shingle and seeing people, but going to homes all over the state, was compelling to him.”

COMMITTED TO EVERYMAN

Wegman next took a job in Puerto Rico, but it was cut short by the onset of World War II. Because civilian doctors were extremely scarce, Wegman returned to New York as director...
MYRON EZRA WEGMAN TIMELINE

1908  Born July 23 in Brooklyn, NY
1928  Completed undergraduate education in classics at City College of New York
1932  Completed MD at Yale
1936  Began working as pediatric “circuit rider” for State of Maryland
1938–1940  Completed MPH and began teaching at Johns Hopkins
1940–1942  Worked briefly in Puerto Rico before WWII took him back to NYC; advised Benjamin Spock on manuscript of Baby and Child Care
1946  Became chief of pediatrics at Louisiana State University/Charity Hospital
1949  Began publishing Annual Review of Vital Statistics in Pediatrics
1952  Worked at Pan American Sanitary Bureau (now PAHO)
1960  Became dean of the University of Michigan SPH
1972  Served as APHA president in its centennial year
1974  Retired as dean of University of Michigan SPH
1978  Became professor emeritus at University of Michigan SPH
2004  Died April 14 at age 95

Although his time in Louisiana was the longest sustained clinical work Wegman ever did, the Wegmans never truly settled in. As political liberals in the pre-civil rights Deep South, Myron and his wife Isabel found segregation disturbing. David Wegman remembers his father saying that he had complained that African American babies could not be placed in the same room with White babies in Charity Hospital’s newborn nursery. Someone from the notorious Huey Long political machine came to Wegman and said, “I’m going to solve your problem, Doc, but you’re not going to like the way I do it.” The babies were combined in 1 room but separated by a strip of tape down the middle of the floor.

Not only was Wegman uncomfortable with race relations in the South, but his tenure in Louisiana coincided with the worst days of the McCarthy era. After his father’s death, David Wegman found among his father’s correspondence letters written by left-leaning LSU faculty members discussing what to do about a faculty loyalty oath. Stewart remembers that because Wegman was “very much opposed to the hunt for communists,” he was considered a “wild-eyed radical” at LSU. He recalls that Wegman and a number of other chief pediatricians around the country wrote a public letter of protest against the McCarthy hearings.

Wegman next spent 8 years at the Pan American Sanitary Bureau (now the Pan American Health Organization [PAHO]), working to strengthen maternal and child health in Latin America and forging strong bonds with such leading PAHO figures as Jose Teruel (now emeritus) and Julio Frenk, now Mexico’s minister of school health for 4 years, with faculty appointments at both Columbia University and Cornell University. During this period, he met Benjamin Spock, who gratefully accepted Wegman’s review of and comments on the manuscript of his book The Common Sense Guide to Baby and Child Care.

In 1946, Wegman became chief of pediatrics at Louisiana State University (LSU) School of Medicine and chief pediatrician at New Orleans’s Charity Hospital. He supervised, among others, future surgeon general William Stewart and Stanford epidemiologist (now emeritus) Ralph Paffenbarger. A major pediatric focus in Louisiana was on controlling diseases such as polio, salmonellosis, and shigellosis among newborns, recalls Paffenbarger. “Myron ran things with an iron fist,” Paffenbarger says. “I don’t mean that disrespectfully, because his decisions were generally very good. He certainly was a gentleman. He treated everybody well.”

“

He had a deep commitment to the core values of our society, of being concerned about those who are less fortunate than we.

– John Romani

He was a deep commitment to the core values of our society, of being concerned about those who are less fortunate than we.”
that the other didn't know. A word in the other's language
league in which each tried to find
on a competitive game with a col-
David Wegman, his father carried
and Spanish. While at PAHO, says
and classical languages to French
extended beyond English grammar
view with Wegman, the students
words.

Despite Wegman’s wide-
ranging experience and interests,
says Stewart, he was always fully
“His whole soul was in whatever he was doing,” he says.
In addition to his son David,
Wegman is survived by his daugh-
ter, Jane Dunatchik; a brother,
Edwin; and several grandchildren
and great-grandchildren. His wife
Isabel and daughters Judy Hirst

Hand, the Sedgwick Medal, in
49, he initiated the Annual
Review of Vital Statistics in Pe-
“His way of doing things was to try to persuade,
which he was good at.”
– William Stewart

and Betty Petersen preceded him in
death. Further details on Wegman’s
life and career, including a video of
his memorial celebration, are
edu/~urecord/0304/Apr19_04/
sph.umich.edu/news_events/107
press.html.

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doi:10.2105/AJPH.2005.066555

Acknowledgments
I thank David Wegman for his kind
assistance with the preparation of this
article.

A TREASURED LEGACY

Wegman’s legacy in public
health extends both to his con-
temporaries and colleagues and
to succeeding generations of stu-
dents. “My ideas of child health
really reflect his influence,” says
Wallis, who first encountered
Wegman’s work and reputation
while a student at Johns Hopkins.
And when her graduate students
transcribed her oral history inter-
views with Wegman, the students
reported learning enormously
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