UM Neurology Researcher Dr. William Sheremata Dies – Hours After FDA Approves Ground-Breaking MS Drug

William A. Sheremata, M.D., emeritus professor of neurology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, passed away on March 29 – but not before learning that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a ground-breaking drug for multiple sclerosis.

“Since joining our medical school in 1977, Dr. Sheremata has been a distinguished educator, clinician and researcher,” said Laurence B. Gardner, M.D., Interim Dean of the Miller School. “He will be greatly missed by our entire Miller School family.”

Internationally renowned for his research on multiple sclerosis and other neurological disorders, Dr. William Sheremata spent more than 40 years on the Miller School faculty, founding the Multiple Sclerosis Center of Excellence in the Department of Neurology the only MS Center approved by the Multiple Sclerosis Society as a Center of Excellence.

“Dr. William Sheremata was a giant in the field of multiple sclerosis with almost 40 years of service to the Department of Neurology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine,” said Ralph L. Sacco, M.D., M.S., professor,
Chairman of Neurology at the Miller School and Olemberg Family Chair of Neurological Disorders.

“Bill was a renowned clinician, researcher, and educator,” added Sacco, who is also Executive Director of the Evelyn F McKnight Brain Institute and professor of epidemiology, public health sciences, human genetics, and neurosurgery. “He took care of countless patients who came from around the country and educated many neurology residents and fellows who are now leaders in the field. My thoughts are with his family. He will be missed by his colleagues and patients.”

Most recently, Sheremata was the principal Miller School investigator in two multi-center clinical trial of OCREVUS™ (ocrelizumab), which on March 29 became the first disease-modifying therapy for the primary progressive form of multiple sclerosis (PPMS) – one of the most disabling forms of multiple sclerosis. It was also approved for patients with the relapsing form of multiple sclerosis.

Six years ago, Sheremata began work on the phase III efficacy studies, OPERA II and ORATORIO, which were sponsored by Genentech. “Dr. Sheremata was looking forward to the release of this medication for the multiple sclerosis population,” said Kottil Rammohan, M.D., professor of clinical neurology, and director of the school’s Multiple Sclerosis Center of Excellence. “We made him aware of the FDA approval before he passed and he was enormously pleased.”

In two studies, OCREVUS demonstrated superior efficacy on the three major markers of disease activity by reducing relapses per year by nearly half, slowing the worsening of disability and significantly reducing MRI lesions. A third Phase III study found that OCREVUS significantly slowed disability
progression and reduced signs of disease activity in the brain. Results from the three Phase III studies were published in the January 19, 2017 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM).

In Genetech’s announcement, Sandra Horning, M.D., chief medical officer and head of Global Product Development, called the FDA’s approval of OCREVUS “the beginning of a new era” for the MS community. “We believe OCREVUS, given every six months, has the potential to change the disease course for people with MS, and we are committed to helping those who can benefit gain access to our medicine,” she said.

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic disease that affects an estimated 400,000 people in the U.S., for which there is currently no cure. MS occurs when the immune system abnormally attacks the insulation and support around nerve cells (myelin sheath) in the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves, causing inflammation and consequent damage. This damage can cause a wide range of symptoms, including muscle weakness, fatigue and difficulty seeing, and may eventually lead to disability.

At the Miller School, Sheremata was the principal or co-principal investigator in more than 20 clinical trials, including OPERA II. He also wrote more than 100 books, monographs and articles on neurological topics and gave scientific and clinical lectures and presentations around the world.

Sheremata earned his B.Sc. degree in zoology from the University of Alberta, Canada, in 1955, followed by his medical degree in 1959. He served as a Captain in the Medical Corps of the Canadian Army, and was stationed in West Germany from 1962 to 1966 as part of the NATO forces during the Cold
War.

Sheremata completed his fellowship in neurology at the renowned Lahey Clinic in Boston, where he was mentored by the late Dr. Norman Geschwind. He then served as director of neurology at St. Mary’s Hospital in Montreal as well as assistant professor at McGill University before joining the University of Miami.

Sheremata is survived by his wife Leah Magel Sheremata, M.D., their two children, Summer and Shelley, as well as six children from a previous marriage: Willow Ann, Thomas Mark, Alden Charles, Tamara Wynne, Jonathan David, and Megan Bernice Sheremata. He is also survived by five grandchildren: Kensie Angeline Hammond, Liam David Sheremata, Islay Lilith Campbell, Johnny Stuart MacMillan, and Hugo Wolf Cooper.