



## Myron Ezra Wegman Spanning the Century

| Valerie J. Brown

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 com-

pleted 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



Young Myron Ezra Wegman.

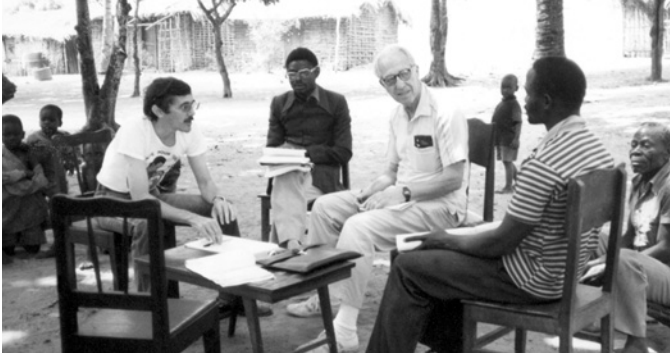
*"He had a great sense of humor. I was struck in reviewing all the photos of him that there's only one where he's not smiling. . . He was always looking on the bright side of things."*

— David Wegman

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



Wegman in Africa.

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

*“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

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.”

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

#### 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 <i>Baby and Child Care</i>
1946	Became chief of pediatrics at Louisiana State University/Charity Hospital
1949	Began publishing <i>Annual Review of Vital Statistics in Pediatrics</i>
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
1997	Stopped publishing <i>Annual Review of Vital Statistics in Pediatrics</i>
2004	Died April 14 at age 95

health. Wegman's notorious linguistic rigor showed itself in his international work. His skills extended beyond English grammar and classical languages to French and Spanish. While at PAHO, says David Wegman, his father carried on a competitive game with a colleague in which each tried to find a word in the other's language that the other didn't know.

### ADMINISTRATOR PAR EXCELLENCE

Wegman became dean of the University of Michigan School of Public Health (UMSPH) in 1960 during another public health watershed. He not only expanded and strengthened UMSPH significantly but also supported and encouraged such actions at other state schools at a time when few were very robust. Lester Breslow, dean emeritus of the University of California—Los Angeles School of Public Health, worked with Wegman in the Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH) and the American Public Health Association (APHA). "Besides being a very able administrator, he was very good at picking faculty and he gave them strong support. He was a strong supporter of me when I became dean and president of the ASPH," Breslow recalls.

Wegman served as dean of UMSPH from 1960 to 1974. The school had a promising momentum, having conducted field trials for the Salk polio vaccine. Wegman's flexible intellect enabled him to solve many administrative problems creatively. When the Nixon administration withdrew funding used to pay junior faculty salaries, Wegman convinced senior faculty to accept a 9-month salary and devote the other 3 months' income to junior faculty.

Ken Warner, now a professor of health management and policy at UMSPH and among the most junior professors at the time, says, "He was the guy who gave me my career and saved it for me within a 12-month period."

Wegman saw public health as an umbrella for many disciplines, says Wallis. Perhaps for this reason—and because his own career had taken an unplanned turn early on—he was able to convert Warner, whose training was in economics, and John Romani (now emeritus professor at UMSPH), who specialized in political science and public administration, to careers in public health. Neither man had planned to stay more than a year or 2 at UMSPH, but Wegman's influence and inspiration proved irresistible. Romani eventually served as Wegman's assistant dean.

Although Wegman left clinical practice relatively early, he never lost sight of the connection between studies of populations and treatment of individuals. In 1949, he initiated the *Annual Review of Vital Statistics in Pediatrics*, editing it for 48 years until reluctantly giving it up in 1997.

Wegman served as president of APHA in its centennial year of 1972, and he was awarded the association's highest accolade, the Sedgwick Medal, in 1974, as well as many other honors. He stepped down as dean at UMSPH in 1974 and became professor emeritus in 1978, remaining involved with university, national, and international public health issues thereafter.

### A TREASURED LEGACY

Wegman's legacy in public health extends both to his contemporaries 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 interviews with Wegman, the students reported learning enormously from Wegman as they typed his words.

Despite Wegman's wide-ranging experience and interests, says Stewart, he was always fully committed to the task at hand. "His whole soul was in whatever he was doing," he says.

*In addition to his son David, Wegman is survived by his daughter, Jane Dunatchik; a brother, Edwin; and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren. His wife Isabel and daughters Judy Hirst*



Wegman in later years.

*“His whole soul was in whatever he was doing. 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 available at [http://www.umich.edu/~urecord/0304/Apr19\\_04/obits.shtml](http://www.umich.edu/~urecord/0304/Apr19_04/obits.shtml) and [http://www.sph.umich.edu/news\\_events/107press.html](http://www.sph.umich.edu/news_events/107press.html). ■*

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