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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Frank E. Young, scientist and FDA commissioner in 1980s, dies at 88

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By [Matt Schudel](#)

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Frank E. Young, a scientist whose early discoveries helped make genetic cloning possible and who later served as commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration during the early years of the AIDS crisis, died Nov. 24 at a hospital in Wilmington, N.C. He was 88.

The cause was lymphoma, said a son, Jonathan Young.

Dr. Young, who had two doctoral degrees, had an impressive scientific and academic career before coming to Washington in 1984 to lead the FDA under President Ronald Reagan.

During the 1970s, he made key advances in the genetic study of bacteria that ultimately made the scientific practice of cloning possible. With a colleague at the University of Rochester in New York, Dr. Young discovered an enzyme — called a “restriction enzyme” — that could be used, in effect, as genetic scissors to alter the genetic makeup of DNA.

In 1975, he and his Rochester colleague, Gary Wilson, published a paper that was widely cited in the fields of genetics and biotechnology. The restriction enzyme, Wilson said in an interview, “would allow you to put DNA together at precise places. That was the beginning of cloning.”

After serving as dean of the University of Rochester’s medical and dental schools, then leading its hospital, Dr. Young took over as FDA commissioner, which he called “the most important post in American medicine today.”

The agency, which had gone through budget cuts under Reagan and a Republican-led Congress, was demoralized as it faced the burgeoning HIV-AIDS crisis. At the time, there was no effective treatment for AIDS, and the FDA came under criticism for delaying the introduction of experimental drugs to patients who had little other hope. He also opposed the approval of at-home testing kits for the AIDS virus, calling them unsafe.

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remembering those who have died in 2019.

“Frank Young was going to be the good guy who would take the heat for making courageous decisions,” San Francisco AIDS activist Martin Delaney said in 1988. “But in reality, he’s been as chicken as they come.”

Dr. Young noted that the country’s research laboratories were caught off-guard by a little-understood deadly disease and that the FDA had only 127 scientists to evaluate the hundreds of applications for drugs proposed to treat the disease.

“We can’t approve something that isn’t there,” he said in 1988. “I think we’ll see a substantial number of drugs coming through for AIDS in the future.”

At the time, the FDA’s approval process for new drugs typically took about eight to nine years. Against the wishes of some of his FDA colleagues, Dr. Young streamlined the agency’s procedures, enabling some experimental AIDS treatments to be introduced to patients in about half that time.

“I love making decisions,” he told The Washington Post in 1989. “I love to be in the vortex of controversy. I never have problems going to sleep. I get energized in general when I’m interested in things.”

In 1989, after trace-level amounts of cyanide were found in two grapes from Chile, Dr. Young temporarily blocked the importation of fruit from that country. The discovery set off a major public health scare, as inspectors went through thousands of crates of Chilean produce without discovering any other deadly chemicals.

“The day I start to look at health with regard to somebody’s left hip pocket or pocketbook,” Dr. Young said, “then I am not focusing enough in regard to safety.”

He was sometimes called politically naive and was criticized for his management style — he often wore his two-star admiral’s uniform from the U.S. Public Health Service — and his coziness with drug companies.

He “has been more concerned with protecting the industries FDA is supposed to regulate,” Sidney Wolfe, director of Public Citizen’s Health Research Group, said in 1989, “than in protecting the public from these industries.”

Dr. Young’s tenure at the FDA came to end in 1989, after three agency employees pleaded guilty to accepting bribes from companies seeking approval for generic drugs. He was not implicated in any wrongdoing and voiced his anger at the “corrupt and fraudulent behavior within the generic drug industry, as well as the apparent breakdown in the ‘honor system’ on which the generic drug review process is, in part, predicated.”

He became an assistant secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services, then from 1993 to 1996 was director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness and the National Disaster Medical System, a multiagency partnership that responds to major disasters. In that role, he helped coordinate responses to hurricanes, floods and, in 1995, the retrieval of human remains in the aftermath of the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City.

Frank Edward Young was born Sept. 1, 1931, in Mineola, N.Y. His father was an accountant, and his mother was an administrative assistant.

After three years at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., Dr. Young entered medical school at what is now the State University of New York’s Upstate Medical University in Syracuse. He received a medical degree in 1956 and then did an internship in Cleveland, where he received a doctorate in microbiology in 1962 from Case Western Reserve University.

He spent five years at what is now Scripps Research, a medical research institute in La Jolla, Calif., before moving to the University of Rochester in 1970. After being named medical school dean, he continued to lead a laboratory and teach classes in microbiology and pathology. While serving as FDA commissioner, Dr. Young was also on the faculty of the Howard University medical school.

After moving to Washington, Dr. Young was an active member of Fourth Presbyterian Church, an evangelical megachurch in Bethesda, Md. He was an ordained minister and, with his wife, led “Couples in Christ” classes for young people planning to be married.

“His religious training taught him to be very ethical, and it never interfered with the research he was doing,” said Wilson, who wrote dozens of scientific papers with Dr. Young. “His wide knowledge in both science and theology didn’t complicate his research; it complemented his research.”

Dr. Young's wife of 51 years, the former Leanne Hutchinson, died in 2008. Survivors include five children, Lorrie Young and Peggy Long, both of Wilmington, Frank E. Young Jr. of Sterling, Va., Jonathan Young of Bethesda and Deborah Rapp of Signal Mountain, Tenn.; a brother; 16 grandchildren; and two great-grandsons.

Dr. Young, who moved to Wilmington in 2013, was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and a consultant to several biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies. At the time of his death, he was executive vice president for regulatory affairs of TissueTech, a biotechnology firm.

"I've come to the conclusion that life doesn't have accidents. There's a degree of purpose," Dr. Young told The Post in 1989. "As long as I analyze a decision, and look at it as carefully as I can and try to do what's right, I don't worry about where the rest of the world is coming from."

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