



Courtesy of the Phair family

John Philip Phair

Infectious disease specialist and influential HIV/AIDS researcher. Born on July 17, 1934, in Paris, France, he died of heart failure on Feb 19, 2024, in Evanston, IL, USA, aged 89 years.

When the AIDS epidemic erupted in the USA in the mid-1980s, John Phair led key parts of the research response to the disease nationally while helping guide local clinical efforts from his position as head of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Northwestern University in Chicago, IL, USA. In 1983 Phair helped form the Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study (MACS), a US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)-supported prospective study on the natural and treated histories of HIV infections in men who have sex with men. He was the “unanimous choice to lead the four-site MACS. He had the right background as an infectious disease expert and he had no ego”, said Charles Rinaldo, Professor in the Division of Infectious Diseases at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. In addition to being a “great person and really smart”, he abated some of the hysteria that marked the early years of the AIDS epidemic by being “very level-headed. He could swim through some very rough waters”, said Robert Murphy, the John Philip Phair Professor of Infectious Diseases at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine and Executive Director of the Havey Institute for Global Health.

After earning a bachelor’s degree from Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA, in 1956, Phair completed a medical degree at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine (UCCOM), OH, USA. He moved to Hiroshima, Japan, shortly

after to study the effects of radiation on survivors of the atomic bomb for the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission. After a residency and, in 1967, an immunology fellowship at Yale, Phair joined the faculty of UCCOM. A brief sabbatical working in virology and immunology at the University of Sheffield in the UK prepared him for a move to what is now the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern, where he became Director of the Samuel J Sackett Laboratories and the first Director of the Division of Infectious Diseases.

Phair treated his first patient with AIDS in 1981 and was a “voice of reason, empathy and calmness”, said Frank Palella, Potocsnak Family Professor of Medicine at Northwestern’s Feinberg School of Medicine. “We had to care for people, rather than treat people”, Phair recalled in a 2011 interview. “It was a shock in the 1980s not to be able to do something for somebody...it was a very tough time.” Phair also advised the Chicago Department of Public Health and local school boards about HIV/AIDS, explaining that “this is not something that’s going to be transmitted through casual contact”, Palella said. At the same time, he was helping to guide the national understanding of the virus as Chair of the executive board of MACS, which was “really instrumental in discovering how HIV infects and what happens right after infection and what happens over time”, Murphy said, including the response to treatment. Phair combated later efforts to shut down MACS, arguing to NIAID officials that the “pandemic constantly changed over the years” and that as the cohort ages, “what we’re observing, what we’re finding is important along the way”, Rinaldo said. Although Phair officially retired in 2000, he remained engaged with MACS until 2019.

In 1987, Phair helped establish the Chicago AIDS Clinical Trials Unit, as part of a consortium then known as the AIDS Clinical Trials Group (ACTG). Phair served as ACTG’s Executive Committee Chair in 1993–95, a “particular window of time when we really launched some major studies demonstrating that our new cocktails [of antiretroviral treatments] actually worked and saved lives”, said Carl Fichtenbaum, the Gregory W Rouan Professor of Internal Medicine in the Division of Infectious Diseases at UCCOM. ACTG researchers also “published a number of studies during that time demonstrating that we could effectively treat a lot of the infections that were taking people’s lives. He was very instrumental,” Fichtenbaum said.

Phair, who also served as a Chair of NIAID’s AIDS Research Advisory Committee from 2000 to 2002, used his position to “train countless numbers of infectious disease specialists”, Palella said. “He was always promoting the people around him and below him. He would give you first authorship on a paper or give you a leadership position he could have taken”, Murphy said. Phair is survived by his wife, Nancy, their children Liz and Phillip, and three grandchildren. “He was the original gentleman and scholar”, Murphy said.

Andrew Green