

Eugene Gettelman, M.D., 100



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Eugene Gettelman, M.D., centenarian, longtime pediatrician and World War II veteran, died at his Westwood home March 14. He was 100.

Dr. Gettelman was born in Milwaukee, Wis., June 16, 1908 to Edward and Augusta Gettelman, who emigrated from Ukraine in 1890. In 1925, he graduated from Lincoln High School in Portland, Ore., where he spent his childhood, and in 1929 he received his bachelor's degree in biological sciences from the University of Washington. He graduated from the University of Oregon Medical School in Portland, now Oregon Health Sciences University, in 1933. While in medical school, Dr. Gettelman excelled in anatomy, and after his first year he was made a technical assistant in the department and eventually became an instructor. He was elected to Alpha Omega Alpha and Sigma Xi, both honorary medical and scientific societies. Upon graduation, he was commissioned a medical officer in the U.S. Army Reserve, and in June 1933, he was ordered to the Civilian Conservation Corps, where he served as a medical officer in the Olympic Mountains in western Washington.

In January 1934, Dr. Gettelman began his internship at the Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago. He became a resident in infectious diseases at the Chicago Municipal Contagious Hospital and subsequently chief resident in pediatrics at Michael Reese's Sara Morris Children's Hospital.

During his tenure at Michael Reese, Dr. Gettelman supervised a number of Jewish physicians. One night, in December 1936, a physician who had escaped from Nazi Germany showed Dr. Gettelman a note in a German newspaper indicating that Bayer AG had produced an early sulfa drug that cured streptococcus infections. Wanting to experiment with the drug to fight almost always fatal streptococcal meningitis, he called Bayer's headquarters in Berlin and a pound of sulfonilamide was sent overnight. Dr. Gettelman guessed at the dose and injected it into the spinal canal of two patients who had been near death; they recovered. (That same day, he also sent portions of the solution via taxi to two area hospitals.) Six patients were saved that year at Michael Reese, and Dr. Gettelman reported the discovery to the American Academy of Pediatrics in March 1938.

In 1942, Dr. Gettelman enlisted in the Naval Medical Corps as a lieutenant commander and served in the South Pacific for four years. After the war, Dr. Gettelman, along with his wife, Rena Ackerman Gettelman, and two sons, moved to the San Fernando Valley. He opened his pediatric practice on Ventura Boulevard in February 1946.

Dr. Gettelman became the West Valley's pediatrician, always doing "every day's work every day." His patients included the children of Lucille Ball, Marlon Brando, Danny Kaye, Dinah Shore, James Brolin and more than 5,000 others. ("Call Dr. Gettelman!" was uttered both on "I Love Lucy" and "Friends.") He practiced in the Valley until 1995, and Providence Tarzana Medical Center's pediatric intensive-care unit is named in his honor.

Dr. Gettelman became associated with Cedars of Lebanon Hospital (now Cedars-Sinai Medical Center) in 1947, where he and the late Dr. Sydney Rosin organized the pediatric department. UCLA opened its pediatric program in 1951, and in 1955 he joined the faculty and was very active in UCLA's teaching and allergy and immunology programs. At the age of 66, Dr. Gettelman was certified as an allergist and a clinical immunologist by the American Board of Allergy and Immunology. He was a member of two honorary medical societies and was president of the California Medical Association's department of pediatrics in 1972. For nearly 40 years Dr. Gettelman also served as a volunteer chief medical officer at Vista Del Mar childcare agency (from 1947 to 1986). He retired from his practice in 1999, after 62 years as a pediatrician.

Dr. Gettelman, who was bar mitzvah four times (most recently in late 2008), joined Leo Baeck Temple the year it opened in 1956 and attended services there until his death.

Dr. Gettelman was predeceased by his wife of 46 years, Rena; his sister, Fannie; and his brothers, Harry and Henry. He is survived by his wife, Lorraine; sons, Alan (Monica) and Michael (Barbara); daughter-in-law, Nancy Gettelman; grandchildren, Andrew (Francesca) Gettelman, Debra Gettelman (Robert Koelzer), Rebecca Spiess Gettelman, M.D. (James Spiess, M.D.), Elizabeth Galicia Gettelman (Sergio Galicia) and Joseph Michael Gettelman; and great-granddaughters, Natalie and Fiona Gettelman and Lucy Mason Spiess.

Contributions may be made in Dr. Gettelman's name to Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services or to the department of pediatrics at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

A memorial service will be held at a later date.



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