Father Of Bone Marrow Surgery Dies At 92

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E. Donnall Thomas, a physician who pioneered the use of bone marrow transplants in leukemia patients, and later won the 1990 Nobel Prize in medicine, has died in Seattle at age 92. The Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center announced the death Saturday. A spokesman said the cause was heart disease.

Thomas' work is among the greatest success stories in the treatment of cancer. Bone marrow transplantation and its sister therapy, blood stem cell transplantation, have improved the survival rates for some blood cancers to upward of 90 percent from almost zero. This year, about 60,000 transplants will be performed worldwide, according to the Hutchinson Center.

"Imagine coming up with an idea, making it a reality and touching that many lives," said Dr. Fred Appelbaum, Thomas' friend and the director of the center's Clinical Research Division. Thomas took after his father and became a doctor after getting his medical degree from Harvard. In 1956, he performed the first human bone marrow transplant. Thomas, along with a small team of fellow researchers, including his wife Dottie, pursued transplantations throughout the 1960s and 1970s despite skepticism from the medical establishment.

They sought to cure blood cancers by destroying a patient's diseased bone marrow with near-lethal doses of radiation and chemotherapy and then rescuing the patient by transplanting healthy marrow. The aim was to establish a functioning and cancer-free blood and immune system. The procedure would go on to become the standard treatment for many sufferers of leukemia and lymphoma.

"He was brilliant, he was incredibly generous and he was quick to deflect praise from himself to the individuals around him," Appelbaum said. "At the same time, while he was quiet and modest, he was stubborn," he added. "He believed in what he was doing and he was going to make it happen. It's hard to imagine today how hard it was to make this reality because it was against the prevailing medical wisdom."

Thomas joined the University of Washington faculty in 1963. In 1974, he became the first director of medical oncology at the Hutchinson Center. It is now one of the world's top cancer treatment and research institutions. Thomas also edited the first two editions of the bone marrow transplantations reference book, *Hematopoietic Cell Transplantation*, which would become a bible for the field.

"To the world, Don Thomas will forever be known as the father of bone marrow transplantation, but to his colleagues at Fred Hutch he will be remembered as a friend, colleague, mentor and pioneer," Larry Corey, president of the research

center, said in a statement. Thomas is survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter.

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