

Robert T. Malison, M.D.
(1959-2020)

Robert T. Malison, M.D., professor of Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine and a long-standing member of the ACNP died unexpectedly at the age of 60 on Saturday, July 25, 2020. Bob, an avid outdoorsman, cellist and tennis player, passed away peacefully in his bed after an acute cardiac event.

At the time of his death, Bob was director of the Clinical Neuroscience Research Unit of the Abraham Ribicoff Research Facilities of the Connecticut Mental Health Center. He was leader of the Neuroscience Research Training Program (T32 grant), the neuroscience research track of the Yale Psychiatry Residency. He also led the Integrated Mentored Patient-Oriented Research Training (IMPORT) in Psychiatry (NIMH R25), and an addiction training grant based in Thailand. At the same time, he was principal investigator on two independent project grants (RO1s).

Bob was a polymath translational neuroscientist and pioneer in addiction research. He came to Yale as a *magna cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Williams College. An AOA graduate of Yale Medical School (YMS'87), he studied molecular mechanisms regulating GABA receptor function in the laboratory of Eric Nestler MD PhD. Continuing at Yale for Psychiatry Residency, he worked with Robert Innis MD PhD to learn SPECT and, later, PET molecular imaging. After an Addiction Fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania, he returned to Yale for the remainder of his career. While he initially studied depression, over time, he shifted his focus to cocaine addiction. In 1996, he established the Cocaine Research Clinic of the Clinical Neuroscience Research Unit. There, he initially studied the regulation of the dopamine transporter, the primary target for cocaine, in the context of the development and recovery from cocaine use disorder. Throughout his career, Bob identified Dr. George Heninger as one of his most inspiring mentors.

However, he studied substance use disorders from multiple perspectives. In order to study the pharmacologic and behavioral mechanisms underlying human cocaine addiction, he adapted the devices used to intravenously self-administer pain medications (PCA pumps) to enable people in the laboratory to self-administer cocaine. Using this procedure, he was able to generate insights into the addiction process and to test novel approaches to the treatment of cocaine use disorder. At the time of his death, he was particularly interested in mechanisms associated with vitamin D-related signaling. With Peter Morgan MD PhD, Bob applied sleep EEG analyses to identify an occult form of insomnia that contributed to relapse. They showed that during recovery, EEG signals associated with restful sleep deteriorated even though patients reported sleeping well. In addition, working with Yale geneticist, Joel Gelernter, MD, he studied the molecular genetics of addiction using a distinctive approach, i.e., studying population isolates with distinctively high rates of substance use disorders. This led him to Thailand to study particular populations, such as the Hmong and other hill tribes.

However, Bob may be best remembered as a pillar of neuroscience education in psychiatry at Yale. In 1996, he became Associate Director and in 2002, Director of the Clinical Neuroscience

Research Unit (CNRU). In this role, he led one of the few academic inpatient psychiatry clinical research centers in the world. This Unit is the home of the Neuroscience Research Training Program (NRTP), a research track of the Yale Psychiatry Residency and a postdoctoral program for psychiatric neuroscience. This program was founded by ACNP member, Dr. Daniel X. Freedman, in the 1950s and formalized under the leadership of several other ACNP members in the 1960s, including Drs. John Flynn, George Aghajanian, and George Heninger. Dr. Malison has co-led or led this program for the past 23 years. NRTP Picnics at the Malison-Vining home were an annual highlight.

Bob was the recipient of a number of national and international honors. However, it is likely that his most treasured honor was being voted “Teacher of the Year” by the Yale Psychiatry Residents Association in 2010.

Bob was brilliant, generous, upbeat and constructive. He was a wonderful colleague. Emails exchanged after Bob’s death universally recall his ubiquitous smile, his kindness, his ready laughter, his availability to trainees, and his supportiveness. Alumni of the Neuroscience Training Program identified him as one of the key reasons they came to Yale, a key figure in their thriving at Yale, and someone with whom they remained in contact after graduation. He was an effective teacher, a skilled and successful mentor, and an extremely good psychiatrist. He was also a careful scientist who conveyed the importance of scientific rigor to his mentees. In addition, he was an accomplished cellist, who performed with the Yale Medical Symphony Orchestra.

Bob was devoted to his family. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Eugenia (Jean) Vining, Assistant Professor of Surgery, a noted Otolaryngologist and outgoing president of the YNHH Medical Staff. He is also survived by their daughters Katie, a Yale College Student, and Emily, a recent graduate of MIT. Family came first. When their daughters were in high school, Bob reduced his faculty effort to spend more time at home. Bob was extremely proud of both of his daughters.

I am in shock, deeply saddened, by Bob’s death. In 1983, as a first year Yale Medical Student, Bob attended an introduction to psychiatry seminar in which I, then a fourth-year medical student, served as the student teacher. I remember two standout students in that section who, it seemed, often sat next to each other, Bob Malison and Jean Vining. We have been friends and colleagues since that time. I was Bob’s resident when he completed his psychiatry clerkship. I was Bob’s attending, when he was chief resident. And, I write with disbelief, I am his chair at the time of his death.

Just a few months ago, we unexpectedly lost another ACNP member, Ronald Duman, Ph.D., a friend and mentor to Bob. Each was distinguished by personal qualities that made their scientific and mentoring achievements shine even brighter. Each died too young and at the peak of their scientific and academic impact.

Bob is sorely missed by all who knew him. We send our condolences to Jean, Katie, and Emily. Details about his funeral will be forthcoming.

John H. Krystal, M.D.

Robert L. McNeil, Jr, Professor of Translational Research

Professor of Psychiatry, Neuroscience, and Psychology

Co-Director, Yale Center for Clinical Investigation

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