When Clark Darwin West, MD, earned his medical degree, pediatric nephrology was not yet a recognized specialty. He became a pioneer and internationally recognized leader in the emerging field. Dr. West passed away January 11th, 2014. He was 95.

West was born July 4th, 1918 in Jamestown, New York. He earned his medical degree at the University of Michigan in 1943. After his residency and two years in the US army Medical Corp, he began a relationship with Cincinnati Children’s Hospital that spanned 65 years.

He arrived in 1948 to begin a research fellowship and joined the faculty in 1951. He established the Division of Physiological Chemistry in 1953, which was renamed Nephrology in 1973. Dr. West lead the division for 36 years as division director. More than 30 fellows trained under him, many now occupy leadership roles. Although he retired in 1989, he did not stop working. He came to Cincinnati Children’s on a daily basis to conduct research, publishing his last two papers at the age of 90.

West’s long distinguished career was marked by many achievements. He was on the team that performed the first pediatric kidney transplant in Ohio, in June of 1965. As associate director of the Cincinnati Children’s Research Foundation, he was often entrusted with writing important grant proposals that shaped the development of the research program at the medical center as a whole.
Fifty years ago, West wrote the proposal that won $2.5 million from the National Institutes of Health to launch the Clinical Research Center, and he selected William Schubert, MD, to be its first director. A few years later, he and pediatric chair Edward Pratt, MD, wrote the proposal that won funding for the second research building at Cincinnati Children’s, the Institute for Developmental Research (IDR).

Not only did West have a leading role in expanding research at Cincinnati Children’s, he also made seminal and ground-breaking contributions to Pediatric Nephrology through his own work.

His early research was on renal physiology, but over time he switched his focus to the new field of immunology because it was becoming apparent that many renal diseases originated from the immune system. “The switch was not without a lot of retooling, not only of the laboratory, but also of my own brain.” he said in reflections he wrote a month ago. “I have, however, never regretted the decision.”

With his new focus, West did breakthrough research on a number of kidney diseases but is best known for his work on glomerulonephritis. Although the disease was first identified in the 1800s, little progress had been made for 120 years. In collaboration with pathologist James McAdams, West developed new tests that allowed him to name and classify a distinct form of glomerulonephritis (membrano-proliferative glomerulonephritis), and he went on to develop successful therapies that are still used.

“*The Cincinnati Children’s community lost a great man*”

- Michael Fisher  
  President and CEO  
  Cincinnati Children’s

Thanks to the achievements of West many children have been spared having to have a kidney transplant, and the field of Nephrology is ever grateful for his advances.

Just this year, West was selected to receive the William Cooper Proctor Medal, the highest honor that Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center can bestow on an individual. Upon hearing the news he said, “As I look at the list of people who have received this award earlier I really feel undeserving… I wish to, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for giving it to me.”

Unfortunately, West passed away prior to the ceremony, though Michael Fisher, Cincinnati Children’s President and CEO observed, “the Cincinnati Children’s community lost a great man.” Indeed, the entire Pediatric Nephrology community did. ◆