

Jean Spencer Felton

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Obituary

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Jean Spencer Felton died in his seaside home in Mendocino, California, on June 12, 2003. Before his death, Jean sent messages to many of his friends telling them that he had decided to forgo dialysis. His messages were not so much about his decision, nor did they dwell on the details of his renal failure. Jean was warning people that a disappointment was in the offing and that he did not want them to be troubled by it. It was the sort of advice Jean was always so good at giving. Here's what I would do... was the way I recall him beginning so many conversations with that steely voice of his.

To the end, Jean was in charge of the situation. And as always, Jean was thinking about others before himself. Little wonder that for many decades he was among the most revered of occupational physicians. His encouragement of younger colleagues, his devotion to occupational medicine, and his love of its rich history were inspirations to his many students, friends, and colleagues.

Jean was born in Oakland, California, in 1911. He went to college and to medical school at Stanford, and following a residency at Mount Zion Hospital in San Francisco, practiced surgery until the outbreak of WWII. At that time he became an Army medical officer, with assignments that included the Philippines and Japan.

Jean had a restless energy, both intellectual and physical. In his lifetime, he did the work of three men and enjoyed the careers of as many. He would take a post and rise to the challenge, then move on to the next opportunity to explore the depths of his talents. By so doing, he had a profound influence on occupational medicine in the West, perhaps more than any other practitioner of his time.

After the war, Jean became medical director at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. In 1953 he was offered the position of professor of preventive medicine at the University of Oklahoma. There, Jean developed what would become a lifelong interest in the teaching of occupational medicine. He returned to California in 1958 as professor of occupational health at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he built the foundation for their Occupational Medicine Residency Program.

In 1968 he became director of the Occupational Health Service of the County of Los Angeles, developing a preventive medical program for over 80,000 employees. Next, Jean's boundless energy resulted in his appointment as chief of the Occupational Health Service for the Long Beach Naval Region and its shipyard, where he conducted seminal research on the effects of asbestos and published many of his most important journal articles.

As clinical professor of preventive medicine at the University of Southern California from 1969 to 1980, he initiated the curriculum in occupational medicine. He then accepted an appointment

as clinical professor of community and environmental medicine at the University of California, Irvine, where he became a leading force in its occupational medicine residency program. Jean finally retired in 1988 to a life of travel and the enjoyment of art and drama while continuing to write and publish.

Jean was on many government advisory panels during his career, but his greatest commitment was to the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, where he served for more than four decades. In 1980 he received the Physician of the Year award from President Carter, a tribute to the important role he played in promoting what was later to become the Americans with Disabilities Act.

His students were always encouraged to write, and to write well. For that reason, the Western Occupational Medical Association instituted the Jean Spencer Felton Award for Excellence in Scientific Writing. Jean found great pleasure in being in the audience or writing to recipients of the award each year. He would tell the recipients that it was an honor to see their names linked with his, and by so doing flatter them beyond words.

Jean wrote many detailed and interesting papers on the history and practice of occupational medicine. Proud of the fact that he knew Alice Hamilton, he wrote the introduction to a later printing of *Exploring the Dangerous Trades: The Autobiography of Alice Hamilton*. One of his final acts was to donate his extensive collection of books and other historical materials to the University of California Library.

Jean's wife Suzanne, along with his son, daughters, and grandchildren shared his long life. His extended family includes us all. What good fortune to have known him.