

Robert Butler, Aging Expert, Is Dead at 83

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Published: July 6, 2010

A version of this article appeared in print on July 7, 2010, on page A13 of the New York edition

Dr. Robert N. Butler, a psychiatrist whose painful youthful realization that death is inevitable prompted him to challenge and ultimately reform the treatment of the elderly through research, public policy and a [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning book, died Sunday in Manhattan. He was 83 and had worked until three days before his death.



Robert Caplin for The New York Times

"Human beings need the freedom to live with change, to invent and reinvent themselves," Dr. Robert Butler wrote in one book.

The cause was acute leukemia, his daughter Christine Butler said.

Dr. Butler's influence was apparent in the widely used word he coined to describe discrimination against the elderly: "ageism." He defended as healthy the way many old people slip into old memories — even giving it a name, "life review."

In speech after speech, he pounded home the message that longevity in the United States had increased by 30 years in the 20th century — greater than the gain during the preceding 5,000 years of human history — and that this had led to profound changes in every aspect of society, employment and politics among them.

Dr. Christine Cassel, president of the American Board of Internal Medicine, said in an interview that Dr. Butler had in effect "created an entire field of medicine." She said he had helped change attitudes so that aging could be perceived "a positive thing."

Dr. Butler was the founding director of the [National Institute on Aging](#) at the [National Institutes of Health](#) and advocated for the aging before Congress and the [United Nations](#). He helped start and led the [American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry](#), the [Alzheimer's Disease Association](#) and the [International Longevity Center](#). President [Bill Clinton](#) named him chairman of the 1995 White House Conference on Aging.

“He really put geriatrics on the map,” Dr. David B. Reuben, chief of the division of geriatrics at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#), said in an interview.

Dr. Butler challenged long-held conceptions about aging, calling it “the neglected stepchild of the human life cycle.” He helped establish, for example, that senility is not inevitable with aging. When the Heinz Family Foundation presented him with an award in 2003, it called him “a prophetic visionary.”

The most noted exposition of his vision was the 1975 book that earned him his Pulitzer, [“Why Survive? Being Old in America.”](#) It went from a bleak explication of the elderly’s condition to [prescriptions](#) to improve it.

“Human beings need the freedom to live with change, to invent and reinvent themselves a number of times through their lives,” Dr. Butler wrote.

Dr. Butler’s mission emerged from his childhood, he wrote in his book. His parents had scarcely named him Robert Neil Butler before splitting up 11 months after his birth on Jan. 21, 1927, in Manhattan. He went to live with his maternal grandparents on a chicken farm in Vineland, N.J.

He came to revere his grandfather, with whom he cared for sick chickens in the “hospital” at one end of the chicken house. He loved the old man’s stories. But the grandfather disappeared when Robert was 7, and nobody would tell him why. He finally learned that he had died.

Robert found solace in his friendship with a physician he identified only as Dr. Rose. Dr. Rose had helped him through [scarlet fever](#) and took him on his rounds by horse and carriage. The boy decided he could have helped his grandfather survive had he been a doctor. He also concluded that he would have preferred that people had been honest with him about death.

From his grandmother, he learned about the strength and endurance of the elderly, he wrote. After losing the farm in the Depression, she and her grandson lived on government-surplus foods and lived in a cheap hotel. Robert sold newspapers. Then the hotel burned down, with all their possessions.

“What I remember even more than the hardships of those years was my grandmother’s triumphant spirit and determination,” he wrote. “Experiencing at first hand an older person’s struggle to survive, I was myself helped to survive as well.”

Dr. Butler served in the United States Maritime Service before entering [Columbia University](#), where he earned his bachelor's and medical degrees. During his internship in [psychiatry](#) at St. Luke's Hospital, he had many elderly patients and realized how little he had been taught about treating them. He began reading about the biology of aging.

After his residency at the [University of California, San Francisco](#), he worked at the National Institute of Mental Health as a research psychiatrist. He studied the central nervous system in elderly people, work that became part of a large study of aging. He also helped [Ralph Nader](#) investigate problems in [nursing homes](#).

The book that emerged from his experiences proposed many specific reforms to help old people, including a national service corps that would enlist the elderly as community volunteers.

In 1975 he succeeded in creating a National Institute on Aging and was its head for six years.

"Nobody thought research on aging was a legitimate field until Bob came along and convinced them to create a separate institute," Dr. Cassel said.

In 1982, the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan asked Dr. Butler's advice on whom to hire for a new geriatrics chair. He proposed instead that the school create a department devoted solely to gerontology. It did, and was one of the first to do so.

He wrote numerous articles and several books, including the bestseller "Sex after Sixty," which he wrote with his second wife, Dr. Myrna I. Lewis, in 1976.

Dr. Butler's first marriage, to Diane McLaughlin, ended in divorce. Dr. Lewis died in 2005. Besides his daughter Christine, he is survived by three other daughters, Carole Butler Hall, Cynthia Butler and Alexandra Butler; and six grandchildren.

Dr. Butler acknowledged in an interview two years ago with The Saturday Evening Post that his views on his own aging had changed: he feared death less.

"I feel less threatened by the end of life than I perhaps did when I was 35," he said.