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## Dr. Jerome L. Sullivan III: Pathologist conceived of 'iron hypothesis'

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Dr. Jerome L. Sullivan III, the pathologist who first theorized of a link between heart disease and iron levels in the blood, died Friday of complications from diabetes. He was 68.

Sullivan, a physician, scientist and professor, was recognized around the world as the father of the "iron hypothesis," which states that people with elevated levels of iron in their blood face a greater risk of heart attacks.

Sullivan, of Winter Park, had conceived of the theory as a junior faculty member at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He was puzzled, as he would later tell People magazine, by "why young women don't have heart attacks." While the risk of heart disease began to rise in men as early as their 30s, women did not show a similar increase until much later — after they had reached menopause.

"He was thinking about it when I first met him in 1979," said Winter Park pathologist Dr. Laura Geisel Sullivan, Jerome Sullivan's wife of nearly 32 years. "One of the first questions he asked me was, 'Why are young women protected against heart disease?'"

The most common guess at the time involved estrogen levels. But the young doctor in Tampa theorized that the true culprit was iron.

Young men begin to accumulate higher amounts of stored iron in their blood once they have stopped growing, usually around the age of 18. But young women don't experience a similar rise, because they regularly shed iron-rich red blood cells as part of their monthly menstrual cycles.

Laura Sullivan was working as a pathology resident at a veterans' hospital in Tampa when Jerome Sullivan called her from across town at St. Joseph's Hospital.

"I think I've got it!" he said into the phone. "It's the iron accumulation over time."

Sullivan published his seminal work, "Iron and the Sex Difference in Heart Disease," in the June 13, 1981, issue of the medical journal The Lancet. The work is still cited by other scientists to this day.

He would continue to research iron and heart disease for the rest of his career, publishing more findings and frequently lecturing at universities. He stopped practicing clinical medicine in 1997 to devote himself full-time to research. Among his many other hypotheses: Men and post-menopausal women could reduce their risk of heart attacks by donating blood.

Sullivan was born in southern Alabama, a descendant of one of the founding families of Dothan, a small city known for harvesting peanuts. He earned his medical degree from the University of Florida and his Ph.D. from Florida State University, and spent much of his career in Charleston, S.C.

The family settled in Winter Park in 1997, as Sullivan scaled back his work and Laura Sullivan, a senior pathologist with the Florida Hospital system, ramped up hers. He later joined the faculty of the University of Central Florida's new medical school, where he had planned to lecture.

Sullivan enjoyed classical music and films and spent hours practicing photography, his amateur passion. But he rarely put his research aside for long.

"He was just thinking all the time. He would look like he was daydreaming, but he was thinking," his wife said. "His major professor at FSU told him to work on important things. And he took that to heart."

In addition to his wife, Sullivan is survived by five children: Best Kimbrell Sullivan of Orlando; Jerome Lee Sullivan IV of Tallahassee; Kathryn Henley Sullivan of Winter Park; William Sheffield Sullivan of Orlando; and Lisa Sullivan Ode of Cumming, Ga. He is also survived by two grandchildren, a brother and a sister.

Byrd Funeral Home in Dothan handled arrangements.

