In Memoriam: Ahmed H. Kissebah, MD, PhD

Ahmed H. Kissebah, MD, PhD, an internationally recognized obesity researcher and one of the founding members of The Obesity Society, died on Thursday, May 17, at his home in Brookfield, Wis. He was 74 years old.

Dr. Kissebah’s research over the decades focused on the areas of metabolism, obesity and genetics. In 1981, he described for the first time a cluster of metabolic features in patients that became known as “Metabolic Syndrome.” His seminal publication described the role of insulin resistance in the metabolic complications of abdominal body fat versus gluteal obesity and the health effects of each. These findings became forever engrained in the public mind as the “apple” versus “pear” body shape, a concept many of us have grown up with.

Dr. Kissebah was born in Damietta, Egypt. He graduated from the Faculty of Medicine, Cairo University, and received both a Master of Science and a Doctor of Medical Science from the same institution. Upon completion of his studies, he accepted a fellowship position in endocrinology, metabolism and clinical nutrition at the Hammersmith Hospital in the United Kingdom, and obtained his PhD in Molecular Biology from the Royal Post Graduate Medical School in London. Dr. Kissebah joined the faculty of the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee in 1977, where he served as the Associate Director, and later the Director, of the National Institutes of Health-designated General Clinical Research Center. At the time of his death, he was Professor of Medicine, Pediatrics, Pharmacology & Toxicology, and Pathology, and was a core faculty member of the Human and Molecular Genetics Center. Dr. Kissebah was a fellow of the American College of Physicians (US), the Royal Society of Medicine (UK), and the International Society of Medicine (Switzerland).

Over the last 15 years, Dr. Kissebah redirected his research towards the analysis of the genetic causes of obesity and its co-morbidities. He led a team of researchers from the Medical College of Wisconsin, the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research in San Antonio, TX, and TOPS Club, Inc., a Milwaukee-based international non-profit weight loss organization, in a landmark discovery that an area on chromosome 3 is associated with all the fundamental features of obesity. Over the past years, he worked closely with TOPS Club, Inc., to explore the unique power of the family-based cohort he recruited and characterized at the Medical College. TOPS members nationwide provided not only data for these extensive studies, but also significant financial support to the work at the TOPS Center for Obesity and Metabolic Research that Dr. Kissebah directed at the Medical College. Throughout his accomplished career, Dr. Kissebah authored and co-authored more than 200 scientific papers and 250 scientific presentations, a reflection of his great enthusiasm for research.

Dr. Kissebah’s work has been recognized through a number of honors, including the Outstanding Foreign Investigator Award (Japan), the distinguished Armour Award from the President of Egypt, the Princess Margaret Distinguished Research Award (Great Britain) and the King Faisal Distinguished Scientist Award (Saudi Arabia). He also was an active and dedicated member of
The Obesity Society. He chaired and organized the 1993 Annual Meeting of the Society in Milwaukee, WI, and has been a regular attendee at the society meetings. As Medical Advisor to the TOPS Club, Inc., he was instrumental in encouraging the establishment of the TOPS Research Achievement Award, an annual recognition award given to a leading obesity researcher since 2007. While Dr. Kissebah will be greatly missed, his contributions to the field of obesity research will live on, and the studies he had initiated and established over the past decades will continue to help our understanding of the genetic basis of obesity, the metabolic syndrome, and the associated co-morbidities. His legacy will be the characterization of the human metabolic syndrome, and the continued genetic analysis of the underlying mechanisms at the TOPS Center for Obesity and Metabolic Research.