

Tribute to Dr. David Bell

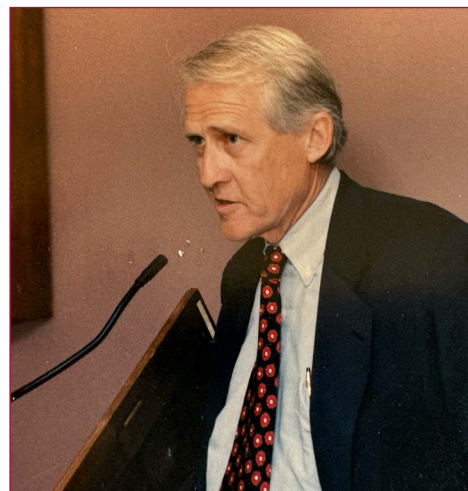
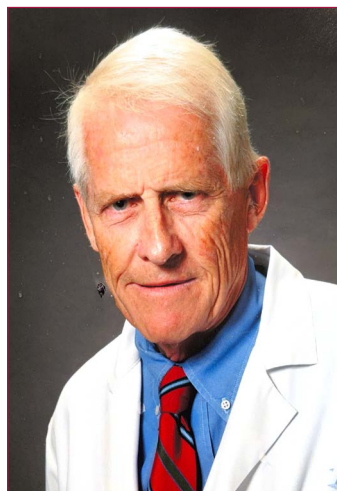
By Lillian Barra, MD, MPH, FRCPC; and Ewa Cairns, PhD

We are deeply saddened to announce the passing of Dr. David Bell, our cherished mentor, and colleague on February 28th, 2026, after a long and courageous battle with progressive supranuclear palsy. David was a highly accomplished clinician scientist whose intellectual curiosity, generosity of spirit, and quiet integrity left an enduring mark on rheumatology and immunology in Canada and beyond. To those who knew him closely, he was a trusted friend, a thoughtful clinician, and a mentor whose steadfast encouragement launched many successful careers, including our own.

David completed his MD in 1963 at the University of Western Ontario, followed by internal medicine and rheumatology training in Toronto, and fellowships in rheumatology and immunology in Rochester, New York, and La Jolla, California. In 1972, he joined the Faculty of Medicine at Western, where he built a distinguished academic career. He served in numerous leadership roles, including Chair of the Division of Rheumatology (1988–1999), Chair of the Medical Advisory Committee at University Hospital, Co-Chair of the Functional Planning Committee at St. Joseph's Hospital, Member of Senate at the University of Western Ontario, and as a member of multiple committees for the Arthritis Society and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the editorial boards of the *Journal of Rheumatology* and *Lupus*. His contributions were recognized by both the Canadian Rheumatology Association and the American College of Rheumatology.

From a research perspective, David was a trailblazer and early adopter of emerging ideas and technologies who made several enduring contributions to the understanding of autoimmune disease. He was among the first to use human hybridomas to identify autoantibodies in healthy individuals, a finding that challenged prevailing dogma at the time but was foundational to the now accepted concept of natural autoimmunity. He also made important contributions to elucidating the key role of defective apoptosis in systemic lupus erythematosus.

Recognizing the importance of future discovery, he was a dedicated collector of biological samples from multi-generational families, laying the groundwork for biomarker studies long before they became commonplace. He personally drove across southwestern Ontario to meet families, educate communities, and ensure that research



was grounded in genuine human connection. Among his most influential achievements was defining the molecular basis of the shared epitope and its critical relationship to citrullinated antigens in rheumatoid arthritis, transformative work that fundamentally advanced understanding of RA pathogenesis. Even late in his career, he was one of the first to recognize the potential importance of homocitrullinated antigens in RA.

As a clinician and educator, he modelled patient-centred care. He never rushed an encounter and took time to listen, explain, and teach. He mentored >100 trainees and early-career investigators. Mentees were encouraged to think critically, review evidence, and pursue their own ideas—an approach that fostered independence, confidence, and discovery.

Beyond medicine, Dave loved jazz, playing the piano and trumpet, art, travel, skiing, and summers at his cottage on Muskadasa Island, especially boating with his grandchildren. Our thoughts are with his beloved wife and family. He will be deeply missed by all who had the privilege to learn from him and call him a friend.

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