

**PHILIP CORFMAN 1926-2019**

# **Advocate helped shape women's reproductive health research**

By Emily Langer

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Philip Corfman, a physician and the director of the Center for Population Research at the National Institutes of Health, was testifying in 1970 before a Senate panel convened to investigate the safety of birth-control pills when a clamor erupted in the gallery.

“Why isn’t there a pill for men?” members of an activist group known as the District of Columbia Women’s Liberation, demanded to know. “Why are 10 million women being used as guinea pigs?”

The protesters were escorted out, according to an account by Barbara Seaman, an advocate whose 1969 book “The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill” helped spur Sen. Gaylord Nelson, D-Wis., to call the hearings. When the proceedings resumed, Dr. Corfman sided with the women.

“The questions were and are important; no one can deny it,” he said years later in an interview published in the volume “For Women Only! Your Guide to Health Empowerment” by Seaman and a co-author, Gary Null. “The activists were women worried about the safety of the pill and had a right to be heard. They also had a right to be wary of the predominance of men on the committee and the fact that almost all of those giving expert testimony were also men.”

Corfman, who later helped remove high-dose birth-control pills from the market when safer versions were available, and whom Ms. Magazine once named a “hero” for his efforts on behalf of women’s health, died Feb. 18 at a retirement home in Bowie, Maryland. He had progressive muscular

atrophy, a condition related to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, said his son Stan Corfman. He was 92.

Cindy Pearson, executive director of the nonprofit National Women's Health Network, said in an interview that the "range and safety of contraceptive methods available to women today" in the United States is owed more to Corfman than to "any other one person."

Trained as an obstetrician and gynecologist, he helped shape reproductive research at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, where he worked from 1964 to 1984 and where he was the first chief of the population center, and later at the World Health Organization and the Food and Drug Administration. He retired from the FDA in 1998.

"We wouldn't have had a women's health movement without Phil Corfman," Seaman, who died in 2008, once said. "He was our mole. He was our inside contact. When we needed to get reliable information, we could always get it from him. When we needed to object to something, he saw that we were heard."

Corfman was credited with using his authority to improve the safety of existing contraceptive methods and expanding research on new ones. He helped lay the groundwork for the emergency morning-after pill, and the National Women's Health Network credited him with guiding mifepristone - the drug also called RU-486 that in combination with another drug can induce miscarriage - "through a complex and politically charged approval process."

Women's health activists praised him for his efforts to provide patients with detailed information about the risks and benefits of their prescriptions and to involve them in regulatory matters. As a member of the FDA committee that reviewed obstetric and gynecological drugs, he saw women's health activists sitting in the hallway and invited them into what had previously been a closed-door meeting about the safety of birth-control pills.

“At a time when doctors were like kings, to have a sympathetic voice made all the difference,” said Alice Wolfson, who was one of those activists and one of the protesters at the Senate hearings. “He was that person.”

Philip Albert Corfman was born in Berea, Ohio, on July 19, 1926. He traced his outlook to figures including his grandmother, who boasted that she could “drive a team of horses like a man”; to his mother, who insisted that, as a housewife, she earned half of the family income; and to his father, the president of the real estate division of Union Carbide, who participated in household chores.

Corfman served in the Navy in the Pacific at the end of World War II, then completed his bachelor’s degree in premedical studies at Ohio’s Oberlin College in 1950. He graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1954. During his early career as a practicing obstetrician, he said, he sought to involve fathers in the delivery of their babies.

Corfman was a longtime resident of Bethesda, Maryland. His wife, the former Eunice Luccock, died in 1980 after three decades of marriage. Their daughter Caris Corfman died in 2007.

Survivors include three sons, Stan, Timothy and Mark; and six grandchildren. His partner of 32 years, Harriet B. Presser, the founder of what is now the Maryland Population Research Center at the University of Maryland, died in 2012.

Corfman brought to his work an egalitarianism that some activists argued had long been absent from contraceptive research. “We need better methods for women,” he once said, “but I think even more importantly they need some reasonably modern methods for men.”