

George E. Thoma, Jr., MD (1922–2016)

George E. Thoma, Jr., MD, an early nuclear medicine leader and the founding editor of *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*, died on January 31 in St. Louis, MO. He was born and grew up in Dayton, OH, and received his undergraduate degree in 1943 from the University of Dayton. After earning his medical degree from St. Louis University (SLU) in 1947, he completed a residency and fellowship in internal medicine there.



In 1948, Dr. Thoma became intrigued by reports of polycythemia vera treatment with the newly available radioisotope ^{32}P . “The hematologist didn’t know how to get it,” he told Newsline in 1986. “And I found out that you couldn’t just write a prescription for it. You had to be licensed.” He enrolled in one of the first physician training courses at the Oak Ridge (TN) Institute of Nuclear Studies (ORINS) and continued his education in the use of radioisotopes at Washington University (St. Louis). With a new license from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), he established SLU’s first radioisotope laboratory at Firmin Desloge Hospital. Except for military service from 1951 to 1954, as a major and flight surgeon in the U.S. Air Force, Dr. Thoma would spend almost a half century at SLU, advancing the science of nuclear medicine and radiological health and leading numerous institutional and national initiatives.

Among his early research interests were localization of intracranial neoplasms with diiodofluoriscin using the newly introduced scintillation counter, exploration of ^{131}I in both diagnosis and treatment of thyroid cancer and dysfunction, and investigation of radioisotopic renal scanning techniques. Dr. Thoma was a pioneer in translating scientific data about the dangers of ionizing radiation into practical information. With colleagues at SLU and elsewhere, he published works on radiation accidents in medicine that would remain mainstays of the field for decades, including the AEC’s *Handbook on Medical Aspects of Radiation Accidents* (1960). His coauthor on the handbook and colleague in many other endeavors was Eugene Saenger, MD, from Cincinnati, OH, whom Thoma had met in the Army Medical Corps and worked with at ORINS. Among other collaborations, they secured funding from the U.S. Public Health Bureau of Radiological Health to assess widespread concerns about possible dangers associated with routine radioiodine treatment. In a landmark paper published in 1968, they concluded that these fears were

unfounded. Dr. Thoma also received funding to explore the biologic effects of gamma radiation as well as radiation exposures to flight crews in nuclear-powered aircraft.

In 1963, Dr. Thoma became assistant to the vice president for the SLU Medical Center and, 10 years later, became vice president, holding that post until he retired in 1986. In this capacity he oversaw the university’s schools of medicine, nursing, allied health professions, graduate department of orthodontics, Center for Health Care Ethics, and hospital during a period of rapid expansion. He maintained his academic appointment as a professor in the department of internal medicine in the School of Medicine. In addition to serving as the founding editor of *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*, Dr. Thoma was chair of the SNM Publications Committee for 10 years and was president of the Central Chapter of SNM in 1964. He also served as medical director for the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, Director at Edgewater Medical Center and Edgewater Foundation, and a Board member with Mercy Health Systems, Detroit Region. As a member of the American Medical Association Council on Medical Education, he traveled on sabbatical in 1986 to the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, to study European medical education

In an extraordinarily vigorous and productive retirement, Dr. Thoma served his community and pursued a broad spectrum of activities. He was president of the Academy of Science of St. Louis from 1992 to 1998 and was responsible for establishment of the Outstanding St. Louis Scientists Awards and expansion of the Academy’s Junior Academy of Science. He served on the Board of Governors for Alexian Brothers Health Systems and was chair of the Missouri Botanical Garden’s Arboretum committee. With Eugenia, his wife, he traveled the world, with a special interest in food and wine. A skilled chef, Dr. Thoma served for 12 years as Maître of the St. Louis chapter of the Commanderie de Bordeaux aux États-Unis d’Amérique.

In addition to his wife, Dr. Thoma is survived by 5 daughters, 3 sons, 17 grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren.

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