Dr. Joe David Wray, a respected authority in international maternal and child health, died at his home in Medford, NJ, on March 9. Dr. Wray was known for his innovations in rural health training for medical students in developing countries as well as for research that provided evidence linking malnutrition to childhood mortality through infectious diseases.

Today it is accepted that about 60 percent of the mortality in Third World children is due to malnutrition. A simple graphic method of identifying and classifying the severity of malnutrition in children that Dr. Wray developed in the 1950s is still in use throughout the world. His research also demonstrated to international agencies that interventions in primary health care and nutrition were affordable and could reduce childhood mortality. In other research, Dr. Wray documented the relationship between maternal and child health and family size. His review of family size showing that parental and child health problems increase with the number of children is widely quoted in the field of population studies and helped convince health personnel and policymakers that family planning has health as well as financial benefits. In the late 1970s, his work for a UNICEF/WHO conference on infant feeding helped persuade policymakers that breast feeding prevents mortality in Third World infants and merited support.

Dr. Wray was born in Conway, Arkansas, in 1926. He served in a U.S. Navy V-12 Unit at Emory University during World War II, and subsequently received his B.A. (1947) and M.D. (1952) from Stanford University. He completed his pediatric training at the Grace-New Haven Hospital of the Yale University School of Medicine (1954-56). In 1956, Dr. Wray became the first chief resident at the newly built Hacettepe Children’s Hospital in Ankara, Turkey. In 1961 he accepted an assignment with a Rockefeller Foundation program intended to improve medical education in Third World countries. He spent the next five years at Universidad del Valle, in Cali, Colombia, as Visiting Professor of Pediatrics, responsible for developing teaching activities to prepare graduates to take care of children in rural areas. In 1966 he returned to the United States to obtain an MPH at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health.

Dr. Wray continued working with the Rockefeller Foundation and in 1967 became visiting professor of Pediatrics at the Ramathibodi Hospital Medical School of Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand. At Ramathibodi, he and Thai colleagues developed a program similar to the one in Colombia to prepare medical students for work in rural health care. Today most medical schools in Thailand (and some in other parts of Southeast Asia) have programs that are based on the one Dr. Wray and his colleagues developed at Ramathibodi.
After returning to the U.S. in 1974, Dr. Wray was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford (1974-75) and then taught at the Harvard School of Public Health from 1975 to 1981, serving as head of the Department of Population Sciences and director of the Office of International Health and teaching courses in international health and maternal and child health. In 1981 he joined the Center for Population and Family Health of Columbia University as a professor of Clinical Public Health in the School of Public Health. He was awarded a Dr. Med. (Honoris Causa) from Hacettepe University in Ankara in 1983. Until his retirement in 1991, he remained involved in teaching programs at the School of Public Health, including courses in maternal and child health, international health and nutrition. In addition, he participated in the international operations research and training activities of the Center in family planning, maternal and child health and primary health care, primarily in Mexico, Haiti, the Sudan and Nigeria, as well as helping to establish Center research programs on the prevention of maternal mortality in West Africa.

Upon his retirement, Dr. Wray became a Professor Emeritus at the Columbia School of Public Health. He also worked as a consultant, evaluating child survival projects and operations research projects, curriculum planning and assessing the nutritional status of children in many countries, including Romania, Egypt, Iraq, Ethiopia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, India, Tibet, Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia (Kalimantan and Java), Papua New Guinea, and Vietnam. He is survived by his wife, Beth, five children and eight grandchildren.