Edwin S. Shneidman, pioneer in suicidologi, dies at 91

By Dr Lanny Berman

On May 15, 2009, Dr. Edwin S. Shneidman died of natural causes at his home in Los Angeles. Dr. Shneidman, a member of IASP and founding president of the American Association of Suicidology (AAS), had just celebrated his 91st birthday. He is survived by four sons, six grandchildren. His beloved wife, Jeanne, died in 2001.

Dr. Shneidman had a profound influence on the field of Suicidology (a neologism he coined), and on untold numbers of suicidologists whom he mentored, stimulated intellectually, and seduced to the study and prevention of suicide. While working as a Ph.D. psychologist for the Veterans Administration in 1949, he serendipitously came across a trove of suicide notes at the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office and immediately envisioned a case-control research study comparing real versus simulated notes to help better understand the minds of those that died by suicide. A lifelong career in the study of suicide followed.

With his colleague and past-IASP president, Dr. Norman Farberow, he co-founded the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center (LASPC) in 1958, which, with the addition of Robert Litman as psychiatric director, became a model for all centers to follow and a Mecca for training future leaders in the field. While there, and under contract to the LA Coroner's Office, procedures were developed to investigate retrospectively a decedent's contribution to their own death, the psychological autopsy, a method now indelibly etched into the armamentarium of research and forensic suicidologists worldwide and which has been singularly responsible for differentially defining risk factors for suicide through case-control research studies. The LASPC's psychological autopsy of the sensational and sudden death of actress Marilyn Monroe in the summer of 1962 led to a surge in calls to the Center (and international renown for the LASPC) and the need for significant numbers of people to handle the influx. Shneidman pioneered and championed the role and importance of using trained lay volunteers to provide help to suicidal callers – the use of volunteers has since become the staple of crisis intervention services world-wide. Starting in 1963, the LASPC became the first suicide prevention center in the world to offer 24-hour help to callers.

Dr. Shneidman left the LASPC in 1966 when he was asked to become the first director of the Center for Studies of Suicide Prevention at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). While there, he

convened a conference in Chicago in the spring of 1968, bringing together a heterogeneous group of international scholars interested in the study of suicide, who, came to consensus that there was a dire need for a national organization for suicide prevention. By the close of that meeting, the AAS was founded. The Center's initial publication, the *Bulletin of Suicidology* (1968–1971), was the fore-runner to the AAS's journal *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* (SLTB), which Shneidman founded in 1971 and edited until 1981. In his brief tenure at the NIMH, the number of suicide prevention centers in the United States, more than tripled.

As a visiting professor at Harvard University in 1969, he befriended psychiatrist-psychologist Henry Murray, whose work on the classification of human needs later inspired Shneidman to develop "ten commonalities of suicide". Later in 1969, Dr. Shneidman returned to California to become a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. The following year he accepted an offer to become a tenured professor in medical psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). In 1975 he became UCLA's first Professor of Thanatology. Over the next decade he would spend sabbatical time at the Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm and as a visiting professor of thanatology at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel.

Dr. Shneidman was a prolific writer, authoring or editing some 20 books. His 1974 work, *Deaths of Man*, was a finalist for a National Book Award. His last, *A Commonsense Book of Death* (Oxford), was published last year commensurate with his 90th birthday.

His career is marked by many honors and awards including the American Psychological Association's award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Public Service, the AAS's Louis I. Dublin Award for a career

of outstanding service and contributions to the field of Suicidology (1972), and UCLA's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science's Outstanding Senior Faculty Award in 1992. In May 2005, Marian College awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Letters and announced the creation of the Edwin S. Shneidman Program in Thanatology. He, perhaps, felt most honored to have an annual award for young contributors given out in his name by the AAS.

Dr. Shneidman's was a Herman Melville scholar and saw, in Melville's writings, especially in his classic *Moby Dick*, a plethora of metaphors about suicide. He built a significant collection of Melville memorabilia, now contributed to and displayed as The Edwin S. Shneidman and David W. Shneidman Collection of Herman Melville at UCLA. The collection includes around 160 volumes, many first edition books, as well as biographies of Melville. Dr. Shneidman arguably had the largest (and perhaps the only) collection of whale-imprinted ties, which he wore practically daily.

Dr. Shneidman was a towering intellect, a brilliant theoretician and clinician, and a fervent spokesperson for the empathic understanding of the psychological pain of those suicidal. He coined the phrase *psychache* to capture the hurt, anguish, and psychological pain in the minds of the suicidal. His theories, writings, and presentations rejected reductionistic efforts to understand suicide as simply a consequence of our genes or of depression and implored clinicians to understand the psychological needs of those at risk for suicide and the unbearability of their psychological pain. He suggested that clinicians needed to ask but two questions: "Where do you hurt?" and "How may I help you?" He coined the word *postvention* to describe activities to help those bereaved by a suicide of a loved one, and promoted the inclusion of survivors in efforts to prevent suicide.

He delighted in the use of a turn of a phrase, a bon mot, a subtle ribaldry, or an oxymoron to capture attention to his theories and his clinical insights. Accordingly, his autobiography, published in 1989 by Brooks/Cole, was entitled *A Life in Death*.

Suicidology has lost its founder and, to his last days, its most ardent champion. His passing will be deeply mourned.

Reprinted with permission from the News Bulletin of the International Association for Suicide Prevention, May 2009 (www.iasp.info)

Lanny Berman is Executive Director for American Association of Suicidology.