

ALS researcher succumbs to disease he studied

January 31 2012, By PAUL ELIAS , Associated Press

(AP) -- Dr. Richard Olney, an internationally renowned researcher who dedicated his life to finding a cure for Lou Gehrig's disease, has died after his own eight-year battle with the disease. He was 64.

The University of California, San Francisco announced Monday that Olney died Friday at his Marin County home.

He had spent nearly his entire 25-year research career at UCSF, the last 18 investigating amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS.

Olney launched the UCSF ALS Center in 1993 to pursue treatments for the disease, which causes patients to gradually lose control of their muscles. It now serves 375 patients.

Olney resigned from the center in 2004 to attend to his own health. He enrolled as the first human subject in a test he helped design of a drug used to combat cancer and the other for AIDS that showed promise in slowing ALS' progress. He adhered to the experiment's rigid guidelines and didn't seek to determine if he was receiving the drugs or medically useless placebos until the end of the test.

"It was typical of Rick to put the value of the medical research before himself and not take the drugs outside the boundaries of the trial," said Dr. Catherine Lomen-Hoerth, an Olney protege who took over leadership of the center. "He knew it was highly unlikely that a treatment would be found during his lifetime, but nothing was going to stop him

from doing whatever he could to advance the research."

Olney was in the group that received the actual drugs.

"It may have helped," Lomen-Hoerth said. "It's hard to know. Early-stage clinical trials like this involve low doses that are designed to test [drug safety](#), as opposed to efficacy."

Some 30,000 Americans have ALS, a small number when compared to other [brain diseases](#).

About 10,000 new cases are diagnosed every year. And while about 10 percent of the cases have [genetic roots](#), it's not known how the other 90 percent occur. It's not contagious and much of current research is focused on genetic and [environmental factors](#) of disease that still mystifies experts today as much as it did when New York Yankee slugger Lou Gehrig died of it in 1941.

Olney graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Oklahoma with a bachelor's degree in 1968. He received his medical degree from Baylor College of Medicine in Houston in 1973.

He is survived by his wife of 38 years, Paula; two children and a grandson. A private memorial is planned. The family asked for donations to be made Olney's name to the UCSF ALS Center.

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