



Hans Selye, MD PhD

Dr. Hans Selye is acknowledged as the "Father" of the field of stress research, having gained world-wide recognition for introducing the concept of stress in a medical context. A distinguished physician and endocrinologist, his theories on the role of organic responses to emotion, illness and injury have revolutionized our understanding of the causes and mechanisms of disease and of the mind-body connection.

Dr. Selye's initial discovery of the stress syndrome was based on the demonstration that the body nonspecifically responded in virtually the same way to various innocuous stimuli or stressors. During his medical studies, he had previously observed that patients with various illnesses appeared to display the syndrome of being sick.

One of his greatest contributions was the demonstration of the stress triad (gastrointestinal ulceration, thymico-lymphatic atrophy and adrenal hypertrophy) and of the role of the hypothalamus in stimulating the hypophysis, the latter gland, in turn, inducing the adrenals to produce corticoids. This led directly and indirectly to the discovery of the steroids ACTH, GRH, somatostatin and other hypothalamic and hypophyseal releasing factors and hormones, laying the ground work for future investigation in this area.

Dr. Selye advanced the theory that stress plays a role in every disease, and that failure to cope with or adapt to stressors can produce "diseases of adaptation", including ulcers, high blood pressure and heart attacks. He called his theory the "General Adaptation Syndrome."

Selye's focus was the whole organism. He pioneered concepts of adaptation energy, stress hardiness, post traumatic growth, and codes of behaviour that were protective of life stressors. Respected for his commitment to educate the public regarding practical applications of stress research, he collaborated in designing a conceptual model for stress education and intervention which was multidisciplinary, holistic and integrative.

Born in Vienna in 1907, he began developing his theories on stress as a medical student in Prague. In 1932, he came to Canada to carry out research at McGill University. In 1945, he transferred to the Université de Montréal, where he founded and became Director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine and Surgery. He held this position until his retirement in 1977. In 1979, Dr. Selye founded the International Institute of Stress and the Hans Selye Foundation.

Dr. Selye published more than 1,700 articles and 39 books on stress. "The Stress of Life" and "Stress Without Distress" were international bestsellers. His work has been cited in over 362,000 scientific papers. In addition to his doctorates he held 43 honorary degrees. He was fluent in at least ten languages. His honours included Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and Honorary Fellow of 68 other scientific societies. He was made a Companion of the Order of Canada (the highest decoration awarded by the country). In 1982, he died at the age of seventy-five in Montreal.