

# Sheldon Margen: An Amazing Passion for Learning and Teaching

By Dale A. Ogar

*At the age of 13 he had read the works of Euclid and was arguing with his high school geometry teacher over how to solve theorems. When he was 15 he enrolled at UCLA. By the time he was 20 he had a master's degree in zoology and experimental embryology, and four years later he graduated at the top of his medical school class from UCSF. With a photographic memory and a passion for learning and teaching, he has become an acknowledged expert in fields ranging from medicine, to nutrition, to endocrinology, to biochemistry, to statistics, to public health, to ethics, and ultimately to what has become known as "wellness."*

Between 1951 and 1972, **Sheldon Margen, M.D.**, was a practicing physician in the Bay Area and the head of Solano Laboratories, which he turned into the first fully automated and computerized clinical laboratory in the western United States. In 1962 he joined the faculty of the Department of Nutritional Science at Berkeley and was the cofounder of the groundbreaking research facility known as The Penthouse. Along with **Doris Calloway, Ph.D.**, he directed more than 20 human nutrition studies on a wide range of subjects, including protein, energy, and trace mineral requirements of healthy adults. The results of this work ultimately became the basis for many of the dietary recommendations still in use today.

In 1979, when **Ruth Huenemann, D.Sc.**, retired as chair of the Public Health Nutrition Program in the School of Public Health, Margen was appointed to fill her position. Up to that point, only one doctoral degree had ever been awarded in public health nutrition. One of Margen's first acts was to revitalize the doctoral program, and in the first two years of his chairmanship, he had 12 doctoral students working under his supervision. Over the course of his career, he has directed the research of dozens of



On October 1, 2004, the public health library at 42 Warren Hall was named the Sheldon Margen Public Health Library. At the naming ceremony, Margen's colleagues paid heartfelt tribute to the legendary professor emeritus, who then took the podium himself to offer thanks and expressions of admiration to his many friends and family members gathered there. Above: Dean Shortell (left) presents Margen with a commemorative plaque. Below: Margen (seated, right) is surrounded by his family at the naming ceremony.

students in both nutrition and public health. Many of them have now become established leaders in their fields. One of his former students, associate dean **Barbara Abrams, Dr.P.H.**, refers to Margen as "an amazing mentor who asked the hard questions and inspired you to find the answers. His incessant curiosity was absolutely infectious."

Margen has worked extensively overseas as a consultant to major governmental and non-governmental agencies. He served as a member and chair of the U.S. Japan Malnutrition Panel of NIH, and as a consultant to the Agency for International Development, the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization, and the government of India. On the domestic front he served as a member and cochair of the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences and as a consultant to the McGovern Senate Select Committee on Diet and Disease and was instrumental in establishing the first set of Dietary Goals and Guidelines for the United States.



In 1982 Margen was approached by a publisher from New York with an idea for a newsletter on health promotion and disease prevention. Two years later the first issue of the *University of California, Berkeley Wellness Letter* was published. Margen became chair of the editorial

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# Report from the Field: Fighting Disease and Heartbreak in Brazil

By Krisztina Szabo

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Over the past several months, I have been in Salvador, Brazil, collaborating on an infectious diseases research project and fulfilling my fieldwork requirement for my infectious disease master's in public health program at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health.

Tonight as I write, I am fortunate to be able to watch one of the amazing Brazilian sunsets overlooking the Baía de Todos os Santos from my apartment window in the city of Salvador da Bahia. The gigantic fluffy clouds reflect the sun's rays in hundred ways in a huge mango-orange swirl. I feel very lucky every day to live and work in this close-to-paradise place for three months. Salvador, once a capital of Brazil and today the center of Afro-Brazilian culture, will mesmerize you with the rhythms of *afro*, the dance-martial art *capoeira*, and the spirituality of *Candomblé*, the Afro-Brazilian religion. The only thing bothering me now, though, is my fever and the muscle aches from a mild case of dengue—a mosquito-borne illness endemic in Brazil and in tropical environments.

How did I get it?

Well, certainly not from my well-situated apartment at Laderia da Barra overlooking the bay. Most likely I got it in Pau da Lima, a shantytown or *favela* with over 12,000 residents where I work several times a week. What is a *favela*? It's an urban slum created by social



Krisztina Szabo holds a Brazilian infant.

inequality. Brazil went through a 350 percent increase in urban population in the last 30 years. One consequence of this urbanization is the *favelas*, which are found in all major cities of Brazil. More than 30 percent of the world's population live in shantytowns and subsist on less than \$1 per day. One characteristic of a *favela* is that despite all its residents, it does not exist on any map. Pau da Lima does not exist because it's located outside of one's peripheral vision, down in a very steep valley with dense vegetation, narrow passages, mud, a huge number of stray dogs, open sewers, garbage, and rats. But most importantly, it is filled with the visible poor encountering visible diseases. It is also filled with spirited people, children playing on the fields with homemade toys, barefoot, but with huge smiles on their faces. It is also filled with volunteers, scientists, and doctors who work in this community with all their hearts. The faces of children and people are the faces of poverty that become part of you.

## Open Sewers, Rats, and Leptospirosis

My work is a combined effort between the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation in Brazil, UC Berkeley professor Lee Riley, and Cornell University professor Albert Ko. I came to work on a disease called leptospirosis, a life-threatening bacterial infection transmitted through contact with urine from infected animals, mainly rats. It is one of the most common zoonotic (communicable from animals to humans) diseases in the world, and in Brazil alone there are over 10,000 cases of leptospirosis per year. It is a disease of poverty that can be easily treated with inexpensive antibiotics, but mortality remains high, about 15 percent due to delayed treatment. Consequences of delayed treatment are severe kidney and liver failure with pulmonary bleeding. Delayed treatment can also result from its diagnostic confusion with dengue, the disease I contracted after working in Pau da Lima. Pau da Lima with its open sewers and high number of rats, makes it an ideal location for the transmission of *Leptospira* because people live and work very close to open sewers with a very high number of rats in the community.


Due to problems with delayed treatment, we are studying if early diagnosis can improve disease outcome. The project team identified a new *Leptospira* protein called LigB that appears to serve as a sensitive target for antibody-based diagnosis. The team wishes to simplify the use of this antigen-detection method, apply it at community level, and see if early diagnosis will lead to early antibiotic intervention and prevent severe disease outcomes.

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board, a position he held until September, 2001, when he turned over this responsibility to [John Swartzberg, M.D.](#), director of the UC Berkeley-UCSF Joint Medical Program.

*The Wellness Letter* has not only become one of the most highly

respected publications of its type in the world, but it has generated nearly \$11 million dollars in royalties to the School—funds which Margen insists be used for student support. His close friend and colleague, former dean [Joyce Lashof, M.D.](#), comments, “His absolutely brilliant mind, coupled with

his attention to detail have never ceased to amaze me. Without Shelly there would have been no *Wellness Letter*.” 

— [Dale A. Ogar](#) is managing editor of the *University of California, Berkeley Wellness Letter*.