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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

John Mendelsohn

The medical innovator made MD Anderson a cancer-care giant.

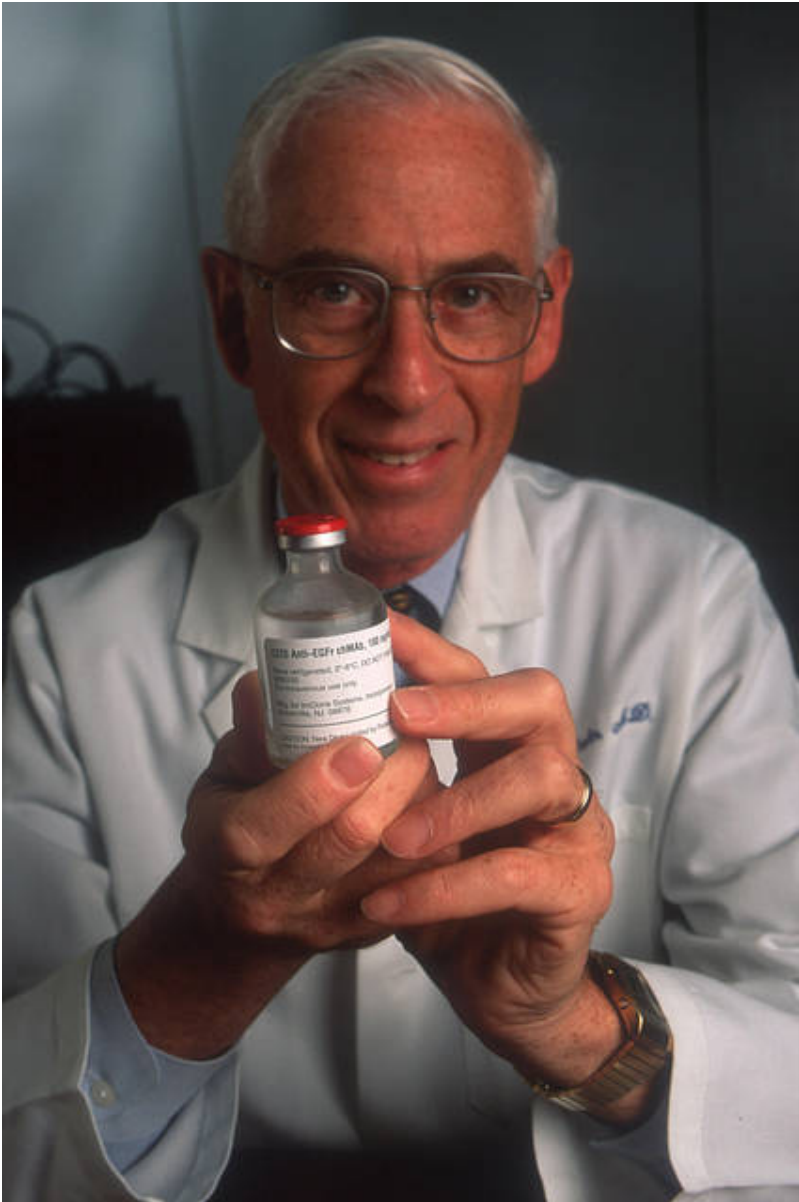
By The Editorial Board

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We live in an age of great biomedical advances, but these don't happen by themselves. They require human ingenuity to discover new therapies, and then human organizations to deliver them to millions of patients. A man who excelled in both was John Mendelsohn, who died this month at age 82.

The Cincinnati native studied at Harvard in the laboratory of biochemist James Watson of double helix fame. Mendelsohn first made his own mark as a cancer researcher, developing with colleagues at the University of California, San Diego, a targeted therapy that blocks receptors on cancer cells to stop their growth.

The drug cetuximab is sold as Erbitux and treats cancers of the colon, head and neck. Approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2004, Erbitux was a major advance over traditional chemotherapy that kills all rapidly dividing cells, with ugly side effects.



Dr. John Mendelsohn, discoverer of C225 at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, with a vial of the treatment.
PHOTO: F. CARTER SMITH/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Mendelsohn became president of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in 1996 and proceeded to make it one of the world's foremost institutions for research and treatment. He raised billions of dollars for research and expansion for the Houston center that in reputation and results now rivals Dana-Farber in Boston and perhaps even Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York.

Mendelsohn retired from MD Anderson in 2011 but remained an evangelist for the discoveries that are making many types of cancer a manageable chronic disease. The doctor died of glioblastoma, the aggressive brain cancer that also killed John McCain, which shows how far we still have to go to cure America's second leading cause of death. But hundreds of thousands will live longer and better lives thanks to John Mendelsohn.

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