Michio Nishida was born in a mountain town in the Ehime prefecture on the Japanese island of Shikoku. His father was an English teacher, but Michio decided early on to pursue a career in science. He was accepted into Kyoto University to study nutrition and physiology and graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in 1973. He later obtained his PhD from the Medical School of Kyoto University.

After graduating, Michio worked for a dairy company, but his interests soon shifted to medical nutrition and then to medical therapy. In 1986, he and his wife Yoko suffered a personal tragedy in the loss of their oldest daughter to non-Hodgkin’s leukemia (NHL). This event changed Michio’s life. Because few effective treatment options were available at the time, he and his wife decided to pursue treatments and a cure for NHL. The 1980s were a prosperous time in Japan, and many companies were diversifying into other areas of business. The Japanese steel company NKK Corporation had made it a priority to enter the pharmaceutical industry, and Michio joined them to translate his wish to find a cure into reality. He scoured Japanese companies, academic institutions, and hospitals for new inventions, new methods, and potential new drugs that NKK could incorporate into their future strategy. Michio made many friends and contacts that were to last a lifetime.

In the late 1980s in California, two small start-up companies based in San Diego and Mountain View began working in the field of anti-idiotypic therapy for the treatment of NHL. The initial work was spearheaded by Dr. Ron Levy at Stanford University and Dr. Ivor Royston at University of California, San Diego, and the companies eventually consolidated their efforts in San Diego under the name IDEC (idiotype technology) Pharmaceuticals, Inc. Like most start-up firms, there was a continuous need for funding to keep the company afloat, and after exhausting many of the sources of venture capital available in the U.S., the company turned to Japan to explore the possibilities of working with a Japanese company to secure funding and eventual marketing there.

On the advice of a colleague in Japan, IDEC hired Michio Nishida in 1990 as its Japanese Representative Director, and IDEC Seiyaku was established. Michio was able to secure funding to
support IDEC’s development of their anti-idiotypic program and later for the development of an anti-CD20 therapeutic antibody. This antibody eventually became rituximab (Rituxan®).

Michio, who formed many liaisons with oncologists, the Japanese Lymphoma Patient Support group, and various companies willing to support the development of rituximab in Japan, fought tirelessly to ensure that the use of rituximab to treat NHL patients became a reality. Rituxan was approved for use in the U.S. in 1997 and in Japan shortly thereafter. Shortly after its launch, Rituxan became the first monoclonal antibody for the treatment of cancer and the biggest selling oncology drug. Michio was driven by the desire to see that lymphoma patients benefited as much as possible from IDEC’s new discoveries, and due to his scientific knowledge, business sense, and large network of contacts, he was able to bring his wish to fruition.

Michio was a compassionate, friendly, and humorous man who enjoyed life, loved his family, and was driven to succeed in developing new NHL therapies. He enjoyed horse racing and was part owner of several race horses. He loved to visit exotic places to enjoy fine wines and warm weather. Michio Nishida was a loyal and dependable friend and will be sorely missed by all who knew him.

Guest Editor:
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