Philip Showalter Hench Biography

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Biography

Philip Hench made important advances in the understanding and hormonal treatment of arthritis and other rheumatic diseases. For his accomplishments, he received part of the 1950 Nobel prize for physiology or medicine, which he shared with his co-worker Edward Kendall and Tadeus Reichstein, who had isolated cortisone in 1936.

Hench was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where his father was a teacher. He graduated from Lafayette College in 1912 and received his medical degree in 1920 from the University of Pittsburgh Medical School. He was affiliated with the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota in 1921, specializing in such rheumatic diseases, as rheumatoid arthritis, which is characterized by swelling of the joints.

In the 1930s, Hench's Mayo Clinic colleague Edward Kendall was studying the pituitary gland hormone ACTH (adrenocorticotropic hormone) and the adrenal gland hormones scortisol and cortisone. ACTH signals the adrenal gland to produce cortisol, and both cortisone and cortisol block the body's ability to inflame the joints and other tissues.

Hench and Kendall studied the hormones' possible use in treating arthritis. During World War II, Hench headed the first program to mass-produce ACTH for medical use. In 1948 and 1949, he and another colleague became the first to use cortisone and ACTH to successfully treat arthritis.

It was soon discovered, however, that the benefits lasted only while the hormones were being administered. Also, they produced dangerous side effects such as high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and obesity, and the use of hormones for these purposes was discontinued.

In addition to his Nobel prize, Hench was honored with such awards as the Heberden Medal, the Lasker Award in 1949, the Passano Foundation Award and the Criss Award. He was also a founder of the American Rheumatism Association and a member of the Royal Society of Medicine.