Dr. Alexander de Lahunta, known as Dr. D to all, Sandy to his colleagues, and just D to those personally close to him, was born in Concord, New Hampshire on December 3, 1932. Raised in Concord, he graduated from Philips Andover Academy Class of 1951. He remained a proud alumnus and followed their sports teams. His admission to the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine's class of 1958 is the stuff of legend. The man who would go on to become one of the most important veterinarians of his generation was not initially selected. A student who had been admitted did not join the class and Alexander de Lahunta was admitted as an alternate. We owe a debt of gratitude to that unknown student. After graduating first in his class, he worked in a general practice in Concord, New Hampshire until 1960. He returned to Cornell as Instructor of Anatomy and Ph.D. student, obtaining his Ph.D. in 1963. The title of the Ph.D. thesis of the man who would become the world's premier veterinary neurologist was "Dehydrogenase histochemistry of bovine rumen epithelium".

He was appointed Assistant Professor of Anatomy in 1963. When he was assigned to teach neuroanatomy he received permission to do
neurologic examinations of hospitalized large and small animal patients on a referral basis and postmortem examinations and histopathology on those animals that did not survive. He continued that pattern for the rest of his career and it was the basis for his astonishing ability as a diagnostician. He rose through the ranks, becoming full Professor in 1973 and James Law Professor in 1992. He was Director of the Veterinary Medicine Teaching Hospital 1976-1982 and Chair of the Department of Clinical Sciences from 1977-1986. Note that from 1977-1982 he was both Department Chair and Hospital Director, each a major task. He then became Chair of the Department of Anatomy from 1986-1991. He was honored repeatedly for his teaching, research, and service by Cornell and national and international organizations, culminating in his being the inaugural recipient of the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine Lifetime Specialty Achievement Award. A bronze plaque has adorned the wall outside of his long-term office since shortly after his retirement with his picture and the inscription: Alexander de Lahunta, D.V.M. '58 Ph.D. '63, Professor 1963-2005, The Beloved "Dr. D". Such was the esteem in which he was held that an anonymous donor endowed the Chair's position in the Department of Clinical Sciences in his honor, now the Alexander de Lahunta Chair.

Dr. de Lahunta published about 300 scientific papers, including 30 published after his retirement. He was author or co-author of the textbooks 'Veterinary Neuropathology', 'Applied Veterinary Anatomy', 'Miller's Anatomy of the Dog', 'Miller's Guide to the Dissection of the Dog', and 'The Embryology of Domestic Animals'. Veterinary neurology was emerging as a specialty in the early 1970s. His book 'Veterinary Neuroanatomy and Clinical Neurology' published in 1977 and now in its 5th edition was a foundational text and he is widely considered the founder of the specialty of veterinary neurology. At the time of his retirement he was, within the veterinary profession, almost certainly the most famous veterinarian in the world.

Amazingly for someone with the career described above, Dr. D felt his greatest accomplishment was teaching the introductory anatomy
and embryology courses to the incoming freshmen each year, which allowed him to get to know every student in the class. To our knowledge he never took a sabbatical or accepted a speaking engagement during any academic semester. Every veterinary student during his time on the faculty was taught and known by Dr. D. His course later in the curriculum, 'Neuroanatomy and Clinical Neurology' was a highlight. Combining lectures, movies, videos, live animals, slides, necropsy specimens, and blackboard drawings, it was meticulously organized and produced a deep knowledge of neurology. Students were known to throw themselves into studying for his courses because they did not want to let him down by performing poorly on an examination. The criteria by which teachers can be evaluated include knowledge of subject, organization, enthusiasm, and respect for students; we never saw a teacher who surpassed him in any of them.

He collected thousands of case histories, laboratory findings, imaging results, and tissues for microscopic examination of animals with neurological disease. Many cases were sent to him from veterinarians worldwide who were requesting consultations. Characteristic of everything he did, his responses were always immediate, with rigorous attention paid to every detail. Dr. de Lahunta used this material in addition to hospitalized clinical cases for his weekly neurology rounds. These “neuro rounds” were a Cornell tradition. They were always widely attended, educational, and challenging, especially since species from dogs to snakes to elephants were presented. He conducted these rounds with precision, and each show had a flair of entertainment, often enhanced by interchanges between Dr. D and his esteemed and brilliant colleague, the late Dr. John Cummings. He also administered, sometimes several times a year, one-on-one, practical or oral examinations so that he could better know each student and evaluate the application of their knowledge.

To accomplish so much Dr. D was efficiency personified. If you happened to drive near the Cornell campus at 5:00 AM you would often see him out for his morning run, even in the harsh Ithaca winters. Dr. D’s runs came after he had already examined all
neurological cases in the large and small animal hospitals, written a detailed examination report on each, answered a portion of his voluminous professional communications and prepared for his morning classes. He was the consummate clinician. Each neurology case was examined in a precise order and in great detail. Many of his examinations were then recorded in some audiovisual format (he mastered more celluloid, video, imaging, and computer technology than most of us can name). Not wishing to bias his own findings, he never wanted to know the clinical findings of others or be given a tentative diagnosis before performing his own examination. For 30 years, these examinations of patients began at 2:00 AM, a fairly taxing time of day for those many students, interns, residents, and clinicians who voluntarily woke up early to join him and then often returned home to bed! His afternoon hours were devoted to teaching laboratories, neuropathology examinations (both gross necropsy and microscopic examinations), and neuropathology rounds. It has been said that a student might spend nine years in veterinary school without seeing Dr. D have a bite of food, but if you went to his office at noon, he could usually be found eating a sandwich brought from home and either looking through his microscope or reading the New York Times. Somehow he found time to answer numerous outside consultation requests, help residents with projects, mentor students, interns, and residents, and contribute to scholarly publications. All of these tasks were performed in a timely manner and with exquisite attention to detail. We have never known of a scientific article, chapter, or book to be delayed awaiting Dr. D’s contributions.

Dr. D retired in 2005. Shortly after Cornell graduation that May he quietly returned to New Hampshire. The honors and testimonials from a grateful Cornell Veterinary Medicine would have to wait.

One of the pleasures of these memorial statements is getting a view of the person. Easily recognizable with his hair always clipped close to his scalp, he was outgoing, positive, energetic, charismatic, and a bit of a showman. He did not need a megaphone to reach the back of a room. While friendly, he did not socialize or hang out in coffee rooms or cafeterias. He managed to slip away before a chat went on
too long. The subject upon which he could be drawn out was Boston sports, including the Celtics and his Red Sox. He could be firm and direct when the task required it such as discussing a grade or evaluating an individual for tenure but was not critical of others.

Dr. Alexander de Lahunta died peacefully at his Rye, New Hampshire home, on Tuesday August 17, 2021, age 88, surrounded by loving family. As incredible as it sounds after reading his accomplishments, his family was his passion and he shared his love of the outdoors with them. They cycled, ran marathons, backpacked in the mountains, skied, played pond hockey and more. He shared 56 years of marriage with Patricia (Frink) de Lahunta who predeceased him in 2011. He was survived by his partner Shirley Reed Dutton, four children, and nine grandchildren.

We close with a description of an average day circa 1990. About 2:00 AM, his footsteps came down the hallway of Schurman Hall to the office he had occupied for about three decades. This was time to catch up on work at his desk and then to walk over to the clinic to pick up the clipboard listing his neurology consultations. He then led a pack of students and others through these “neuro rounds,” finishing up in time to run at 5 o’clock. By 7:00 AM he would sip his one cup of coffee and enjoy the daily bagel while reading the newspaper. This was his preparation time for the day that loomed ahead. By 8:00 AM he was giving lectures, attending lectures, teaching in the anatomy laboratories, performing postmortem examinations, examining tissues from deceased animals, or participating in meetings. The day would remain full until late afternoon when he returned to the office to write up notes, think about tomorrow’s lectures, and write or read. Friday afternoons were reserved for the old vet library reading room where he would often sit near his friend John Cummings, reading the newest journal articles that had appeared on the shelves that week. 5:45 PM. He walked out the door, never locking his office, simply walking out into the night. Elvis has left the building.

Written by Maurice White (chair), Thomas Divers, Susan Fubini, and John Hermanson