Dr. Ronald Weinstein, 83, a pioneer in the development of telemedicine and a longtime professor at the University of Arizona, died Dec. 3 in Tucson.

When the country went on lockdown in March 2020, Weinstein’s innovations proved monumental for health care during the pandemic.

“He was always ahead of his time, connecting rural and frontier communities with up-to-date health information, technical assistance and consulting through distance learning, webinars, workshops and instruction,” said Dr. Daniel Derksen, director of the University of Arizona Center for Rural Health.

The center is part of the UA's Mel & Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health.

“Telemedicine wasn’t well known before the pandemic, but without it, many people who were reluctant to receive in-person treatment or attend primary care visits during lockdown and even now would not have received any care once the pandemic set in.”

Weinstein’s work was recognized in May when a new Arizona law was signed by Gov. Doug Ducey, making permanent the telehealth flexibility that had been permitted under executive orders Ducey had issued during Arizona's COVID-19 public health emergency.

“It’s really been held with a brake on it for 50-plus years and waiting to be proven,” Weinstein said of telemedicine at the time. “COVID came along, and social distancing and so forth, and within a month the amount of telemedicine being done in the United States went up about 3,000% ... Moving forward, now it becomes a different world.”

Known as the “father of telepathology,” Weinstein, whose medical career spanned nearly six decades, most recently served as the co-founder and director of the Arizona Telemedicine Program at the University of Arizona.
His work in Arizona telemedicine dates to 1996, when he was named director of the program after it got support and financial backing from the state Legislature, led by efforts by former Arizona State Rep. Robert Burns.

Throughout his career, Weinstein was a trailblazer in medicine, technology and public health policy.

He was born in Schenectady, New York. He received his medical degree from Tufts University School of Medicine and completed his residency in pathology at Massachusetts General Hospital. He participated in his first telemedicine cases in 1968 as a resident physician there.

In 1975, at age 36, he became the pathology department chair at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke’s Medical Center in Chicago.

He invented, patented and commercialized robotic telepathology in 1986, when a 66-year-old woman was diagnosed with breast cancer, via satellite, through the technology created by Weinstein. And so the word “telepathology,” coined by Weinstein, was introduced to the English language.

Weinstein was recruited to the University of Arizona in 1990 as chairman of the Department of Pathology.

The Arizona Telemedicine Program revolutionized virtual health care. Back in 1996, telemedicine was a complicated process, not easily understood by those outside the medical field, but was refined and expanded by Weinstein and his team over the decades. Weinstein was inspired to create a technology that would allow people in all parts of Arizona to access health care, especially those living in rural areas.

Weinstein’s contributions to telemedicine went beyond the clinical and technological aspects. Along with Burns, he worked to improve public policy and incorporate telemedicine into public health care.

As a result, Medicaid in Arizona started paying for telemedicine services. The federal government was also inspired by Weinstein and the state of Arizona’s policy on access to telemedicine. Medicare soon began paying for telemedicine and telehealth appointments for all Medicaid enrollees after the policy change in Arizona.
“Dr. Weinstein was so effective for so many different reasons. One of those reasons was his ability to comprehend public policy and actively work to change health care policies in the state,” said Will Humble, executive director for the Arizona Public Health Association.

“Many doctors are great with medicine, but don’t understand politics at all. Dr. Weinstein understood every side of health care, from the clinical portion to the public policy portion — he instinctively knew how to really make things happen in the state, and eventually in the whole country.”

Even beyond needs created by the pandemic, telemedicine has become an important part of keeping care comfortable for those who need routine check-ups or continued care.

Derksen said that telehealth has been revolutionary for the medical field in many ways, especially for people who have chronic conditions that require monitoring.

“Thanks to real transformative leaders like Dr. Weinstein, we can now not only use the tools that have been around, but also improve them and make them even more available for things like remote monitoring of folks with heart arrhythmias, for example, who can now be monitored remotely instead of having to stay in an intensive care unit.”

“We don’t have to be so dependent on bringing people in every day for routine things,” Derksen said.

Humble predicts telemedicine will become a permanent part of how medical systems deliver care, especially in areas that have less access to in-person health care.

“Where I think it will continue to make a really big difference is in areas where it matters the most, those rural areas in Arizona and in other states. Living in these areas can make going to a doctor's visit an all-day affair, or even something that requires an overnight stay due to travel time. With what Dr. Weinstein and the university have done to revolutionize telemedicine, this process is becoming easier for so many people,” Humble said.

Beyond his contributions to the medical field and the field of telemedicine, colleagues described Weinstein as energetic and upbeat.

Humble said, “Dr. Weinstein really struck me as someone who was just so interested in so many things. He accomplished more than most people ever will. He had an interesting life personally and professionally and did so many interesting things. I will miss him a lot, but I see his life as one that was well-lived. He truly loved his work, and not everyone can say that.”
Derksen said, “Dr. Weinstein was an inventive, creative innovator – creating a vision of enhancing health care delivery and making it more accessible via implementation of an ‘information superhighway’.”

“Ron was just a very energetic, positive person. He was inspiring. He was welcoming and collaborative — always willing to lend a helping hand. He was a terrific person and all of us who worked closely with Ron are going to miss him deeply. Hopefully, we can honor him by continuing to expand and improve the programs that he was so foundational in getting started.”

Weinstein died of cardiac complications. Survivors include his wife, Mary; his children, Katherine Weinstein Miller (Craig Miller) and Dr. John Weinstein (Brian Mikesell); and his grandsons, Miles and Oliver Miller.

A celebration of life is planned from 1-3 p.m. on Jan. 16 at the UA Health Sciences Innovation Building, 1670 E. Drachman St., Tucson. In lieu of flowers, his family asks that donations be made to the Dean’s Fund for Excellence at the UA College of Medicine–Tucson.