

Masao Omata — A Life that Inspires Generations

In the ever-evolving world of hepatology, specific names transcend the boundaries of time and geography. Among them, one shines as a beacon of wisdom, resilience, and inspiration — Professor Masao Omata. Calling him a legend is no exaggeration; to those who know him, he is a living example of what can be achieved when brilliance is guided by humility and a strong sense of purpose.

Masao's story began at Chiba University, where he graduated in 1970 and joined the First Department of Internal Medicine under Professor Kunio Okuda, a leading figure in Japan's hepatology field. Wanting to expand his horizons, Masao worked at Yale University with Professor Gerald Klatskin, and then at the University of Southern California with Professor Robert L. Peters. It is at that time (1979) identified the viral cause of hepatocellular carcinoma marked a turning point in liver cancer research. The significance of this discovery was so great that it was included in multiple editions of *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*, the cornerstone of medical education. In the early 1980s, he introduced molecular biological techniques to Japan, an audacious step at the time. He linked HBV pre-core mutant to fulminant hepatitis (*NEJM*, 1991), and to demonstrate that interferon could achieve remarkably high eradication rates in acute hepatitis C (*Lancet*, 1991). In 1985, with Yokosuka and Summers, he identified covalently closed circular DNA (cccDNA) as the key molecular reservoir of hepatitis B — a discovery that remains the cornerstone of all modern HBV therapeutic research. These were not just papers; they were revelations that transformed the way the world understood liver diseases. To date, he has authored more than 1,300 scientific papers, published in the world's most prestigious journals — including *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Lancet*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *Gastroenterology*, *Hepatology*, *Gut*, *Journal of Hepatology*, *Cancer Research*, *JCI*, *PNAS*, and even *Nature Genetics* and *EMBO Journal*. His work has been cited more than 107,000 times, and his H-index of 166 places him among the most influential scientists in all of medicine.

In recognition of his achievement, Masao also broke barriers in Japanese medical history in 1992. He was appointed Chairman of the Second Department of Internal Medicine at the University of Tokyo, the first non-University of Tokyo graduate ever to lead a major clinical department — a testament to merit transcending tradition. In 2009, he was invited by the Governor of Yamanashi Prefecture to become the President of Yamanashi Central Hospital and Kita Hospital. Masao didn't just oversee these institutions; he transformed them. Under his leadership, they became centers of excellence in patient care, medical education, and research. In these roles, Masao embodied the ideal of service—using science not for fame, but to improve people's lives. His leadership has also extended far beyond Japan. Masao has served as President of the Asian Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver (APASL) (2006–2007 and Editor-in-Chief of *Hepatology International*. He was also one of the catalysts to

corporatize the APDW Federation and sat as the Executive Member on the Board from 2010 to 2021.

For these monumental contributions to hepatology and medical science, Professor Masao Omata was awarded the **Emperor Showa Memorial Award in 2025** — a rare and distinguished honor, previously bestowed upon none other than Dr. Baruch S. Blumberg, the Nobel Laureate who discovered the hepatitis B virus. It was a fitting recognition of a man whose entire life has been devoted to unraveling the mysteries of the liver disease.

Knowing Masao for almost 4 decades, perhaps his greatest legacy lies not only in his discoveries but also in the generations he has nurtured. To him, teaching was never just a duty — it was a calling. He gave his students not only knowledge but also opportunity: the freedom to explore, the courage to question, and the discipline to persevere. The countless young men and women he mentored now lead departments, publish groundbreaking research, and advance hepatology worldwide — each carrying the spark he once ignited. His gift as a teacher is that he never sought to create followers but thinkers; not imitators but innovators. The discipline, curiosity, and compassion he instilled have grown into a living legacy — one that continues to shape the local and international landscape of liver medicine today.

Yet beyond all his honors, achievements, and titles, Masao also is a devoted family man, deeply loved by his wife Kiyo, their three children, and five grandchildren. In their quiet company, he finds the same joy and grounding that his students and colleagues have found in his mentorship.

Today, as we celebrate his unparalleled journey, we also celebrate the light he continues to cast upon us all. Masao's life reminds us that true greatness is not measured solely by the papers we publish or the titles we hold, but by the lives we touch, the minds we inspire, and the hearts we uplift.

Congratulations, Professor and more importantly Mrs. Omata, on a life so richly lived, a legacy so profoundly built, and a spirit that continues to inspire all of us who follow the path you have illuminated.

