

Honoring Our Longest-Serving Employees: Mary Carskadon, PhD, a Pioneer of Sleep Science

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Preparing to speak with Mary Carskadon, PhD, one of the world's most respected sleep researchers – well, it might just keep you up at night.

Brown Alumni Magazine declared her a “pioneering sleep scientist” who is “still discovering new frontiers.” A recipient of the National Sleep Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award, Carskadon is the director of the sleep and chronobiology research lab and the



director of the COBRE Center for Sleep and Circadian Rhythms in Child and Adolescent Mental Health, both with Bradley Hospital. She is also a professor with the department of psychiatry and human behavior at The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University.

Carskadon was a student at Stanford University's doctoral program in neuro-and biobehavioral sciences in the late 70s when she and a team established the first way to objectively measure sleepiness, the multiple sleep latency test (MSLT). The test remains a standard used by sleep researchers and in sleep disorders medicine for diagnosing narcolepsy.

Discovering Rhode Island

In 1985, Carskadon was a research associate at Stanford, deep into exploring the sleep cycles of teens who seemed to get plenty of sleep, but whose behavior indicated otherwise. By then, her doctoral mentor, Thomas F. Anders, MD, had become the newly appointed chief of child and adolescent psychiatry at Brown University and academic director at Bradley Hospital. She took him up on his offer to launch her own sleep lab at the hospital and has been deepening Brown University Health's reputation in medical and science research ever since.

A Lifetime of Proven Research

Her decades of research showed that adolescents biologically require more sleep than when younger and undergo a shift to later timing of sleep. The findings were endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics when it recognized that insufficient sleep for adolescents is an important public health issue that significantly affects the health and safety, as well as the academic success, of middle and high school students. So far, in the 25 years since the campaign to push school start times ahead (typically from 7:30 am to 8:30 am) has been progressing, more than 500 middle- and high-school districts worldwide – including Barrington, RI – have shifted their start times.

Researchers Want to Have Fun

Carskadon's significant professional accolades are complemented by a down-to-earth warmth and spunkiness. "I'm the most normal person," she reflects. "I like to have fun. I'll be at these important meetings, and I'll crack a joke. It comes from my dad who said, 'Why be so serious, find some joy and enjoyment in things'." Her signature purple—courtesy of Splat's Midnight Amethyst hair dye—streaked through her white hair, is a nod to his playful advice and to her staff's vote for the color change.

Sleep Research Requires Space

Over the years, Carskadon's work has attracted future clinicians and researchers to the field and to Rhode Island. Henry T. Sachs III, MD, now Bradley's president, was one of her fellows. She and her team long ago outgrew the original lab space Dr. Anders offered, expanding to the campus of Butler Hospital.

In 2021, Carskadon and the team were awarded \$10 million from the National Institutes of Health for the first and only research center focused on pediatric sleep patterns, circadian rhythms, and mental health. "Our goal is to integrate sleep and circadian science into clinical research at the hospital, and we are enhancing the careers of clinical scientists with our research," she adds.

Less Sleep Does Not Equal More Time

Carskadon lives by a formula she devised: < Sleep ≠ > Time (Less Sleep Does Not Equal More Time). She goes to bed around 10 pm and is awake by 5:45 am. She can be found twice a week at an early morning tennis lesson, and every Sunday morning has a match with a colleague, who she self-deprecatingly quips has great patience (she's been playing tennis since she was on her high school's team). Her time spent on the court is meaningful. "These are the best hours of my life," she says. In January 2025, she attended the Australian Open.

The Future of Sleep is Here

"My research is inspired by my thinking and where I should be going, but it depends on funding," she notes. "I would love to be learning more about how caffeine affects the sleep and biological rhythms of kids and adolescents." She stands firm when she says, "No child needs caffeine."

She adds, incidentally, that coffee milk (a Rhode Island birthright) is also a popular drink in the state of South Australia. Could the next frontier in sleep research team Rhode Island up with the "Land Down Under"? Shh...Mary Carskadon is sleeping on it.