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## Ian Alger, Pioneer in Innovative Therapeutic Techniques, Dies at 82

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

Dr. Ian Alger, a New York psychiatrist who pioneered the use of innovative therapeutic techniques, including video, in family and couples therapy and was an early proponent of teletherapy, in which therapist and patient communicate remotely by videoconferencing, died on Feb. 21 at his office on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. He was 82.

The cause was [heart failure](#), said his wife, Anita Menfi Alger, also a family therapist.

Dr. Alger was one of a small group of therapists who applied psychoanalysis, Freud's one-on-one therapy, to family and couple relationships. In group sessions he would guide interactions among several family members in order to detect patterns that were disruptive, subconscious and often rooted in adults' own earliest relationships.

In 1965, when Sony introduced its half-inch reel-to-reel video recorder, he and a close colleague, Dr. Peter Hogan, decided to use it — with patients' permission — as part of the therapy, so people could see body language and other subtle reactions.

Patients' reactions could be "almost immediate," said Dr. Andrew J. Gerber, a psychiatrist at Columbia and former student of Dr. Alger's.

For example, in one of Dr. Gerber's sessions, with a married couple, Dr. Alger sat in and recorded a nervous tapping habit of the wife's. He later played the tape back, explaining the tic's likely effect on the couple's interaction.

"Dr. Alger's innovation of incorporating video recordings really helped our field move forward," Ronald J. Chenail, a professor of family therapy at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale and editor of the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, said in an email. "In much the same way as a coach will review recordings of athletic events to note particular patterns, Dr. Alger's insight led psychotherapists to do much the same thing in their research and practice."

Ian Ewart Alger was born on June 20, 1926, in Oshawa, Ontario, the only child of Ewart Alger, who ran a local newspaper, and Greta Alger. He graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in medicine in 1949, and completed his residency in [psychiatry](#) at Bellevue Hospital/ NYU Medical Center. After two years working at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in New York, he served in the Army as psychiatrist at Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco, before returning to New York to complete training in psychoanalysis and start his own practice. He held appointments at [Albert Einstein College of Medicine](#) and Weill Cornell Medical College.

From the mid-1950s through the late 1990s, Dr. Alger published widely in journals on the effect of using video in therapy. He participated in the first Veterans' Administration Satellite Telemedicine broadcast, anticipated the use of virtual reality in therapy, and devised an unusual method to illuminate emotional conflicts: on a split screen, patients saw two profiles of their own face, one recorded from the left side and the other from the right — the two “faces” embodying contrary urges, Dr. Alger argued.

Dr. Alger's first wife, Elizabeth Joyce, died several years ago. In addition to Ms. Menfi Alger, he is survived by four children from his first marriage, Derek and Timothy, of New Jersey, Wendy, of Barrie, Ontario, and Penelope Kohut of Andover, Mass.; and three grandchildren.

Dr. Robert R. Rynearson, a psychiatrist at [Texas A&M](#) Medical School, said in a telephone interview that at a workshop he saw Dr. Alger demonstrate the dramatic effect of video. After a husband in one session denied that he had been angry with his wife, he watched himself on tape — and acknowledged that in fact he had been mad.

“Men believe what they see on television,” Dr. Alger said.

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