Nicolae Testemițanu (1927-1986) was born into a large farm family in the rural village of Ochiul Alb, then part of Romania. The village name is translatable as “White Eye,” so-called after a local practice of putting sheep’s wool on dangerous pools of water to make them more visible in low-light conditions. While Ochiul Alb, in the historical region of Bessarabia, was officially part of northeastern Romania at the time of Testemițanu’s birth, it was incorporated into the new Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1940. After primary education in his birth village, Testemițanu continued his studies at the Lyceum “Ion Creangă” and then the Lyceum “Mihai Eminescu” in the city of Bălți, the second most important city of Moldova. In 1945, he began studying medicine at the newly founded State Medical Institute in Chișinău (Kishinew), where he rapidly distinguished himself. After terms as a surgical assistant and service in the MSSR’s Department of Health, he defended his thesis as doctor of medicine in 1958.

In 1959, at the age of only 32, he was named the first-ever Moldovan rector of the State Medical Institute in Chișinău (the position had been previously held by ethnic Russians). In 1963, he was appointed Minister of Health of the MSSR, meanwhile continuing to serve as chair of surgery, traumatology, and orthopedics at the State Medical Institute.

However, in 1968—a time of political turbulence in many regions of the Eastern Bloc including Moldova—he was sacked from his leadership positions, primarily for stating his support for Moldovan independence from the Soviet Union and alliance with Romania. (Other factors in his fall from grace included his appointment of several native Moldovans instead of Russians to prominent university positions, and his criticism of Soviet-backed agricultural policies that involved heavy use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, which he saw as unhealthy.) After his dismissal as medical institute rector and health minister, he continued to perform research in public health academic positions, writing more than 200 papers and 15 books before his sudden death in Chișinău in 1986 at the age of 60.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1990, the Republic of Moldova declared sovereignty and achieved full independence in 1991. Thereafter, the reputation of Testemițanu was quickly revived. The medical school in Chișinău was renamed the “Nicolae Testemițanu University of Medicine and Pharmacy,” and several other schools, as well as buildings and streets, were also named after him.

In 2002, Posta Moldovei issued a stamp (Michel #440) in his honor, which misspelled his name as Testemiteanu (the correct spelling is Testemițanu).