

Prof. Alain de Weck – Eulogy

Friday, April 12, 2013

Cathedral of St. Nicolas, Fribourg, Switzerland

I would like to share with you some thoughts about Professor Alain de Weck the researcher, the teacher, and the pioneer in medical sciences that he was.

From the earliest age on Alain showed an inquisitive mind with a sharp intellect and curiosity. He did not visit a regular school until age 12, which perhaps explains some of his tendencies to think deeply and rely on his own intuition rather than the consensus of a larger group.

Having completed his baccalaureate in classical Greek studies here in Fribourg at the Collège St. Michel in 1947, he subsequently started his medical studies at the Universities of Fribourg, Lausanne and finally, Geneva. This choice was a natural one as his own father, Ladislas, was a gifted medical doctor specializing in pneumology and the effective treatment and eradication of tuberculosis. Alain pursued his medical studies with vigor and was envisioning primarily a clinical career, just like his father had done.

Then, however, around 1955, he came under the tutelage of Professor Werner Jadassohn, a famous dermatologist in Geneva. There he started investigating the occurrence and root causes of contact dermatitis using the guinea pig as a model. This initial interest became a full-fledged passion during his stay - as the first National Health Service foreign research fellow from Switzerland - at Barnes Hospital at Washington University in St. Louis from 1958 to 1960 under the guidance of Prof. Herman Eisen. I know that Carole and Lionel remember these adventurous years quite well. There, in St. Louis, Alain made initial contributions to what was to become one of his signature research areas: penicillin allergy.

He quickly made a name for himself and was a pioneer during the formative years of immunology and allergy research. Starting in 1961, after his return to Switzerland, he established himself as a professor at the University of Bern. To quote Johannes Ring in a 2009 article in the World Allergy Organization journal: *“Quote: It was Alain de Weck's work [...] that finally led to the concept of hapten inhibition as a preventive modality in allergy. In those days it became clear that monovalent binding does not*

induce allergic reactions, but bridging of antibodies on the surface of the mast cell has to occur. End Quote”.

From 1971 until his retirement in 1993, he was the founder and then head of the Institute for Clinical Immunology at Bern, which became one of the leading such research institutes in Europe and perhaps the World. Many discoveries and contributions were made during these years, some very fundamental to again quote Professor Ring: *“Alain de Weck [...] was engaged in various projects such as developing better diagnostic techniques with in vitro cellular assays [involving] basophils after priming with Interleukin 3, T cell regulation, and IgE and anti-IgE antibodies. End Quote.”* Some of the discoveries Alain made with his colleagues were more down to Earth and even recognized in the local Bernese Press such as the now well-known “Cheese Washer’s Disease” (in German: "Kaesewascherkrankheit"), a special form of farmer's lung syndrome that afflicts people especially in the Emmental Valley. Alain was a master at bridging theory and application. One of his more practical inventions was the Immunodot technology for IgE-based detection of allergies and other diseases such as HIV using low cost cellulose strips and optical density measurements. This venture led to Alain becoming an entrepreneur. He founded the Centre Medical des Grand Places or CMG company which was subsequently sold to Heska of Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1997 and is still a profitable research and manufacturing company here in Fribourg today.

One of the things Alain was best known for was his leadership in and of international scientific organizations. He served as president of both IUIS, the International Union of Immunological Societies as well as the International Association of Allergology and Clinical Immunology (IAACI). Other societies like the Collegium Internationale Allergologicum, the European Academy, the Swiss Society, the German Society and the World Health Organization (WHO) also benefitted from Alain’s enduring leadership. One of his accomplishments in science diplomacy was to bring new countries and scientists into the fold, included the former Soviet Union and Taiwan. The crowning achievement of these activities was a memorable and highly successful congress in Montreux in 1988 with thousands of satisfied participants who still raved about this event 25 years later. We need to acknowledge that Alain was blessed with strong support in his scientific endeavors by his 2nd wife Christine who proofread many of his manuscripts and accompanied him on most travels for a period of 30 years during the prime of his career.

Alain received many award for his scientific work including the 1972 Robert Koch Prize in Life Sciences and the 1990 Clemens von Pirquet Medal. He was elected as a

foreign member of the French National Academy of Medicine. But – according to Alain – his greatest pride and professional accomplishment was not the awards but the key ideas and hundreds of former students, postdocs, research fellows and colleagues who had the privilege to work with him and who have shared the passion for medical research with Alain.

Even after his retirement from Bern in 1993 Alain remained active as an Extraordinary Professor at the pontifical University of Navarra in Pamplona Spain, as a frequent columnist in newspapers voicing his opinion on a wide variety of topics such as the distinction between true science and pseudo-science, genetically modified organisms and the future of health care policy. Thanks to Brigitte's care and understanding in his last 12 years he was still able to publish and be productive. Alain and I started collaborating on a joint book on Health Care Systems last year and he continued working on his chapters even right up until the end. His hope was that this book will embody his vision of modern healthcare as a well organized system that blends modern medical technology with the human touch and caring that he himself benefitted from in his last few years of excellent care at the Inselspital in Berne as well as at the Cantonal Hospital and the Providence here in Fribourg.

Let me close in Alain's own words which he wrote in his 2008 Autobiography titled "Memories: Failures and Dreams":

"Quote: I have the comforting feeling to have led a very full and interesting life; in fact to have had more than one life. It was so full from work, people, travels, events, that it seems to have been more than one single opportunity. Although failures and unfulfilled dreams may be even more numerous than achievements, the general feeling at the end of the road is one of peaceful serenity. I always belonged to those seeing their glass as half-full: when there will be nothing left to drink, I probably will no longer be thirsty anyway".

Dear Alain, thank you for the many contributions you have made to the science of immunology and allergy and other fields and the inspiration your passion has provided to us, the younger generation. We will now have to go on without you. But you will never be forgotten.

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