Norbert Matussek (1922–2009)

With the death of Norbert Matussek on 10 November 2009, the international communities of Biological Psychiatry and Psychopharmacology lost one of their foremost members. The CINP lost one of its Honorary Fellows and all of us a dear friend and trusted colleague.

Norbert Matussek was born in 1922 in Berlin. He studied medicine and chemistry in Heidelberg, Tuebingen and Munich and received his M.D. degree in 1952 from the University of Munich and his Dipl.Chem. in 1955 from the University of Heidelberg.

From 1954 to 1956, he worked with Adolf Butenandt, a Nobel Laureate in Medicine, at the Max-Planck Institute in Tuebingen where he pursued studies on Ecdyson which he characterized as a steroid hormone, and on the isolation and structural characterization of Substance P. In 1961, he received a postdoctoral fellowship to spend a year with B. B. Brodie in the Laboratory of Chemical Pharmacology at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. It was there where his research orientation changed to biochemical neuropharmacology with emphasis on the action of psychotropic drugs such as reserpine and tricyclic antidepressants on noradrenergic and serotonergic mechanisms in the CNS.

Upon return to Germany, he continued his studies on the role of biogenic amines in the action of psychotropic drugs at the Max-Planck Institute of Psychiatry in Munich. He and his research group contributed significantly to the catecholamine hypothesis of affective disorders, a hypothesis that was simultaneously advanced in the USA by Joe J. Schildkraut, William B. Bunney and John M. Davis. In 1971, when Hanns Hippius became Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University (LMU) in Munich, Norbert switched from the Max-Planck Institute to the Psychiatric Clinic at the university where he was charged with setting up a Department of Neurochemistry. He did this enthusiastically and successfully: He developed a first-class clinical research department, adding neuroendocrine studies in depression to his research endeavours. He focused his research on the growth hormone (GH) response to amphetamine and clonidine. With both drugs, he found a blunted GH response in patients with endogenous depression in comparison to patients with non-endogenous depression and healthy control subjects. He suggested that the blunted GH response to clonidine is a trait marker of endogenous depression and not a state marker of depression.

As an enthusiastic teacher, Norbert Matussek had a great impact on the development of Biological Psychiatry in Germany as many of his pupils and collaborators became leaders in the field and many chairs in Psychiatry became occupied with young physician scientists whose careers were decisively influenced by Norbert Matussek’s critical scientific thinking and teachings, e.g. O. Benkert in Mainz, H. Beckmann in Wuerzburg and E. Ruether in Goettingen.

I met Norbert first when we both were Postdoctoral Fellows in Brodie’s Laboratory of Chemical Pharmacology at the NIH some 50 years ago. I always cherished his high intelligence, his broad knowledge, high objectivity and moral integrity and his compassionate attitude to people. We both shared the view on the immeasurable value of psychotropic drugs as tools for the analysis of central nervous function at various levels – physiological, biochemical, behavioural,
molecular. His research contributions to basic and clinical neuropsychopharmacology were honoured by the International Anna Monika Prize for research on depression, the Duphar Antidepressant Award and the H. J. Weitbrecht Prize for biological research on psychoses. Norbert Matussek was an integral part of the Munich Clinic which received international recognition when the World Health Organization (WHO) named it a ‘National Collaborating Center for Biological Psychiatry’ and an ‘International Reference Center for Psychotropic Drugs’.

Norbert, a superb scientist, a compassionate and honest human being and a dear friend has left us. We all miss him dearly.

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