

OBITUARY

Erich Kuhn (1920-2014)



Erich Alfred Kuhn, former Director of the Policlinic for Internal Medicine in Heidelberg and erstwhile champion of German myology, passed peacefully away in his home on 8 October 2014. He was born on 23 November 1920 in the little Thuringian village of Oberrod close to the border to Bavaria and visited high school in the nearby town of Schleusingen. After passing his A-levels he was recruited to the then obligatory “imperial work duty”. After the start of World War II in 1939 he was drafted to the German Army, but at the same time was allowed to study medicine, first at Würzburg, then at Greifswald, where he passed his bachelor’s examination. Shortly after, he was promoted to the rank of a “junior medical officer” (Unterarzt) because doctors were needed on Germany’s Russian front. He was even able to complete his medical studies at Jena while still in the army. Nevertheless, after

the war, he preferred to sit the official German state exam in medicine at Heidelberg.

In Heidelberg he was attracted to the Medical Polyclinic because this hospital had by far the greatest number of outpatients. Here, he served on all the wards and his remarkable memory for the many and varied cases he saw made him an excellent medical all-rounder. In fact, he liked the atmosphere at this hospital so much that he stayed there to the end of his career, going through all stages from assistant, to consultant, and on to become its Medical Director. Scientifically, he focussed on his main interest in myotonic diseases which he had first encountered at Jena. Thus, in 1959 he devoted his “Habilitationsschrift” (the inaugural thesis required for entry to German-speaking academia), to myotonic dystrophy (published in updated form two years later, Ref. 1). In recruiting many families and recording all clinical details he felt inspired by the spirit of Heidelberg’s great myologist Wilhelm Erb who had published the first monograph on myotonia (2). “Wilhelm Erb (d. 29 Oct 1921 at the age of 81) could not close his eyes and rest until I was born.” Kuhn would banter.

One of Kuhn’s many achievements that benefitted muscle patients was the foundation in 1965 – together with six additional parents and physicians – of what is now the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Muskelkranke (German Muscular Disease Association, DGM). For several years he served on the board of governors and was president of the scientific council of this self-help organisation.

Kuhn was concerned not only about the muscle patients, but also their doctors. Even as late as 1965 Germany was still suffering from the bad reputation and the isolation that the atrocities of the Nazis had brought about. Kuhn found a remedy: Invite the muscle celebrities of the world to Germany! Actually an international conference on neuromuscular disorders had so far never been held. Kuhn was bold enough to organise such a conference – all by himself – at his home town of Heidelberg, and about 150 of the celebrities came. The usefulness of such a meeting was then so evident, that the influential myologists decided during the meeting that the World Federation of Neurologists (WFN) should henceforth organise similar conferences at regular time intervals. The

resulting series of International Conferences on Neuromuscular Disorders (ICNMD) numbers 13 to date. Kuhn was very proud to have given the impulse to this series and called his Heidelberg meeting jokingly: ICNMD-zero. The scientific proceedings of ICNMD-0 was published a year later by Springer (3).

Kuhn attended many of these international conferences, and when the younger generation of German myologists had acquired enough self-assuredness to apply for the organisation of ICNMD-VII in Munich, it was he who successfully defended the bid at ICNMD-VI in Los Angeles 1986. In the following years he attended the preparation of this conference with great enthusiasm.

After Kuhn had retired from his post at the Heidelberg Policlinic in 1986 he performed the Herculean task on behalf of his DGM by stipulating the foundation of Muscle Centres at the Medical Faculties of nearly all German Universities. Using his qualities as an elder statesman as well as a strong-headed Thuringian farm boy, he managed to get the existing specialist doctors in the various faculties to collaborate for the benefit of the neglected muscle patients. A yearly updated report contains the progress of the now 26 centres (4). It goes without saying that one of the centres, at Ulm, has its emphasis on ion channel diseases, the category that contains “his” myotonias and periodic paralyses (5). For that missionary

achievement, the DGM bestowed on Kuhn an honorary lifetime membership.

As a doctor, Erich Kuhn was very much liked by his patients because he was open, honest and never patronising. He had many scholars and students who, amongst themselves, liked to call him “Vater Kuhn” because he cared for their progress like a real father. For more than 60 years Kuhn was married to his wife, Agnes, who bore him three daughters and a son.

Reinhardt Rüdel

*Em. Professor für Allg. Physiologie,
Loschweg 16, D-89081 Ulm, Germany
E-mail: reinhardt.ruedel@uni-ulm.de*

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