



In Memory of Professor Horst Schleusener

Horst Schleusener passed away on 12 July 2015. From the late 1960s to the 1990s of the last century, he was a leading figure in thyroidology in Germany and Europe.

Born, raised and educated in Berlin, a wartime city that then got divided, he studied medicine at the Free University, from which he graduated in 1959. His academic focus on the thyroid came about by serendipity. Once asked by Werner Scherbaum why he had become a thyroidologist, he revealed that Gotthard Schettler, the head of his medical department at the time (later to become director of the Heidelberg University Hospital), advised him to choose the organ that started with an alphabetic alliteration to his surname, i.e. 'Schilddrüse' (thyroid). He remained faithful to this organ throughout his professional life.

After his internship, he went to work for 18 months with J. Maxwell McKenzie at the Canadian McGill University of Montreal, where he further characterised the long-acting thyroid stimulator. According to his wife Annerose Schleusener, who accompanied him, this must have been one of the happiest periods of his life. After his return to Germany, he established a research group funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and others. In 1969, he advanced to the senior position of 'Oberarzt' (consultant/senior registrar), and was in the group of physicians under Max Schwab, who developed the structure of internal medicine in the Klinikum Steglitz (now known as Campus Benjamin Franklin) in Berlin. In 1971, his habilitation treatise was approved and he gave his inaugural lecture on 'The Regulation of TSH Synthesis and Secretion'. Together with Jürgen Quabbe and Wolfgang Oelkers, he created a competitive, academic Department of Endocrinology at Steglitz.

Thyroid research gained momentum in the 1960s due to innovations in biochemistry and nuclear physics in medicine and immunology. Radioimmunoassays were introduced in thyroid testing and these allowed functional diagnostics for the first time. Schleusener's first PubMed-listed publication with his colleague F.A. Horster described the 'biological test for the thyrotropic hormone' [1], and paved the way for further research. In 1967, together with K. Schimmelpfennig and F.A. Horster, he received the first Schöller-Junkmann prize, awarded by the German Endocrine Society (DGE). This award was for his 'new findings on the pathogenesis of Basedow's disease' [2]. The impact of thyroid research on endocrinology was notable, leading to the creation of its own section within the DGE, founded in 1972, and similar to the British Thyroid Club (based on the London Thyroid Club from 1950) and the French Groupe de Recherche sur la Thyroïde. Schleusener organised two of the Thyroid Section's yearly meetings (in 1980 and 1988, together with Alexander von zur Mühlen) and two of the legendary Homburg/Saar Thyroid Conferences (the first in 1973 and then, with Renate Pickardt, in 1983).

Horst Schleusener was a member of several scientific societies, namely the DGE, the American Thyroid Association and the European Thyroid Association, the 9th annual meeting of which he organised for 4-8 September 1978 in Berlin.

His group was amongst the European competitors for the first or best TSH-receptor antibody assay (TRAb), and they contributed milestone papers on the distinction between Graves' disease and disseminated autonomy [3].

He coordinated two major multi-centre studies funded by the BMBF, and was supported by endocrine physicians as well as the nuclear medicine departments of German university hospitals. In one such investigation, he demonstrated that relapsing Graves' hyperthyroidism can neither be predicted by the TRAb titre at the end of thyrostatic drug treatment nor by the suppression scintigram [4]. This conclusion was confirmed in a later meta-analysis [5].

In another multi-centre trial, he showed the efficacy of target-dosed radioactive iodine treatment for Graves' disease [6], and it was early on that he recognised the importance of HLA-linked disease susceptibility for Graves' disease [3,7,8].

Horst Schleusener was a major contributor to improvements to the classification and treatment stratification in hyperthyroidism. He received wide recognition both nationally and internationally. It was always stimulating to work with him on projects, analyses and papers and to design clinical trials. With generosity and selflessness, he supported his disciples in their further professional development, and he was valued as a mentor his whole life long.

A first stroke in 1981 and a second in 1988 did not stop him continuing his work; rather, he showed himself and others that he controlled the handicap with strong willpower, and trained his focus on the fields of scientific, clinical and cultural interest. After his retirement in 1995, he took up a completely new topic, and, with his wife, he studied the culture of Ancient Egypt. In doing so, he fulfilled his strong desire to learn and understand. He was motivated by curiosity, even in his final months: once admitted to hospital for pneumonia, he told the staff that he was not afraid of death, but rather, was curious to know what was going to happen next.

Horst Schleusener leaves behind his wife Annerose, two children and two grandchildren.

Colleagues, disciples and friends will remember his unique character.

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