

In Memoriam Reinhold E. Schmidt (*17.12. 1951 – †23.1.2022)



Everyone who knew Reinhold was deeply saddened by his unexpected, untimely death. In his Christmas greetings 2021, he indicated that he was not feeling well. I called him immediately and learnt the whole tragedy of his rapidly progressing cancer, which was discovered in June. During the conversation, he made a sad but composed and extremely disciplined impression. My attempt to reach him again via WhatsApp on 20.1.22 came to nothing.

What Reinhold E. Schmidt meant to the national and international immunology community and the huge gap he leaves behind has been echoed in numerous obituaries and tributes. My aim is to shed light on Reinhold's human side from the perspective of a long-time friend and academic companion. We have maintained regular scientific and private contact since 1983, initially through the Clinical Immunology Working Group (AKKI). Then, at the annual meetings of the German Society for Immunology (DGfI) and the American Association of Immunologists (AAI), I became acquainted with the results of his postdoctoral research with Stuart F. Schlossman (1983-86 at the Dana-Faber Institute, Boston). Reinhold was a co-author on several publications of the working group S.F.Schlossman, J.Ritz, E.Reinherz, R.MacDermott and T.Hercend. The group described the first NK cell-specific monoclonal antibodies NKH1 and NKH2 (JCI 1985; 75: 932) and Reinhold was subsequently first author of a paper on the release of toxic proteoglycans during NK cell-mediated cytotoxicity (Nature. 1985; 27;318:289-91). This was followed by the description of a clonal NKH1 subpopulation that simultaneously expressed a clonal T cell receptor, CD3 and CD8 and became known as the NKT cell subpopulation (J Exp.Med. 1986; 163: 812).

As I myself had been researching spontaneous/natural lymphocytotoxicity since 1972, our personal friendship always had a scientific aspect. It was a logical consequence that Reinhold was appointed to my vacant C2 position in 1985 after I moved from Hanover to Freiburg. In 1995, following the retirement of Helmuth Deicher, he then took over as head of the Department of Clinical Immunology, which was expanded in 2007 together with Rheumatology and Infectiology to form a new, forward-looking 'Clinic for Rheumatology and Immunology' at the MHH. In this role, Reinhold E. Schmidt and his team led by Torsten Witte (long-standing Senior Consultant, specialist in autoimmunity and immunodeficiency and Reinhold's successor), Matthias Stoll (vasculitis, bone marrow transplantation), Georg Behrens (inflammation), Engelbert Gessner and Jörg Köhl (Fc receptors, complement), Dirk Meyer-Olson (HIV and NK cells) and other colleagues have played a key role in shaping clinical immunology in Germany for more than two decades. In addition, Reinhold, whose heart was always burning for immunology, has shown exemplary commitment to professional politics at various levels over the years. Here are just a few representative key points:

i) his DGfI presidency (2005/06) with the publication of the brochure 'Immunology in Germany 2006',
ii) his commitment in long, tough negotiations with the German Medical Association (from 1995 to 2020) for the recognition of immunology as an additional training programme in the German Medical Training Regulations, iii) his initiative for the establishment of a Translational Immunology School (TIS) of the DGfI, which has been meeting annually in Potsdam for top-class training courses since 2012. iv) Finally, his outstanding commitment to the Scientific Advisory Board of the Paul Ehrlich Institute (PEI), the Foundation Board of the German Rheumatism Research Centre (DRFZ), the German AIDS Society, the International Union of Immunological Societies (IUIS) and v) his presidency of the 2nd European Immunology Congress EFIS 2009 in Berlin.

Besides all these time-consuming commitments, was there still room for Reinhold for other activities? Well, one outstanding characteristic was his enthusiasm for sport: there was never a congress where we didn't go jogging together before breakfast - if there was a lake nearby, he would reliably jump in afterwards. Reliability, honesty, perseverance and self-discipline paired with problem-orientation and effectiveness were Reinhold's great strengths of character; whatever he took on, he completed with determination - in line with the English proverb 'If you want to get something done, give it to a busy man'. He always spread an infectious zest for life, optimism and warm conviviality. Two joint activities have remained particularly vivid in my memory over the years:

After my move to Freiburg and Reinhold's takeover of Clinical Immunology in Hanover, the many friendly ties between the two departments were to be continued somehow. So we decided to organise an annual football match with a social aftermath between the departments. A trophy was to be awarded to the department with the most victories after 5 years. I won't hide the fact that during this time I selected doctoral students and civil servants according to their ball skills; one of them, for example, was a Brazilian fellow who still plays for the Brazilian senior national team today. As it turned out, Freiburg won four times, Hanover one and the trophy stayed in Freiburg. But that didn't diminish the joy we shared at these events.

Since 1993, I have been involved in training activities with Reinhold in the newly independent Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. With the support of the DGfI, industry sponsors and the Baltic immunology societies, we organised six one-week summer schools for immunology in Palanga, Nidden, Trakai, Riga, Tartu and Vilnius between 1993 and 2001, in which many renowned German and foreign immunologists took part as speakers. These activities promoted exchanges and friendships with their Baltic colleagues, enabling them to organise further immunology conferences independently, e.g. with the support of EFIS. Reinhold last visited our mutual friend Stasys Gendvilis in Kaunas 6 years ago with his wife Rita, who remembers this with sadness.

In Reinhold E. Schmidt, immunology has not only lost a great and exemplary physician, scientist and academic teacher who made a historic contribution to clinical immunology in Germany. Above all, we have lost a marvellous person and a loyal, unforgotten friend.

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Hans-Hartmut Peter