



Biology of Blood and Marrow Transplantation

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Obituary

Obituary - Dr. Hans August Messner



Dr. Hans August Messner, Canada's (and one of the world's) most prominent marrow transplant physicians died on July 24, 2018 at the Princess Margaret Cancer Center, in Toronto.

Hans was born in Brunn, Czechoslovakia in 1941 and grew up and went to school in Fulda, West Germany. After medical studies at the University of Freiburg and the University of Ulm in 1969, a love of science, relentless curiosity, a spirit of adventure (and a serious failure to check out the climate in Canada) led him to pursue PhD studies at the Ontario Cancer Institute at the Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. Toronto in the 1960s was far from a sophisticated world city—it was not called 'Toronto the Good' for nothing. But what Hans knew very well was that Toronto was the home to the world-famous laboratories of James Till and Ernest McCulloch, which were at the epicenter of blood stem cell research at the time. What Hans could not however have known was that Toronto was also home to a young graduate, later medical student, named Sandy Shuve. The two met on Hans' very first day in Toronto. Four years later they married. A short overseas gig in a famous lab in a faraway land best known for snow and polar bears had

quickly turned into a most passionate professional and personal embrace lasting nearly 5 decades. And what decades they were, spanning 2 continents and the entire era of successful marrow transplantation to the present time.

Nearly 50 years later in February 2017, Dr. Messner—scientist, clinician, husband, father, grandfather—stood before his colleagues in Tampa at the Tandem meetings. Having already failed at retiring a few times by then, Hans was presented with the lifetime achievement award of the American Society for Blood and Marrow Transplantation. For those who might not know why such an honor was bestowed, let us recount some of the many reasons.

The laboratories of Till and McCulloch attracted to Toronto some of the best and brightest to work on the problems of normal and leukemic hematopoiesis. As a scientist, in their lab and subsequently in his own lab, Dr Messner was the first to demonstrate in man that marrow stem cells needed soluble factors to grow and differentiate (later these factors were identified as cytokines). He was the first to characterize human pluripotent stem cells (CFU-GEMM) and the first to demonstrate that such stem cells could be found in cord blood. As a clinician, he performed some of the first bone marrow transplants in Canada, co-founded and headed the first marrow transplant program in Canada, a program that now bears his name. Once bone marrow transplant programs, often modeled on the one at Princess Margaret, began springing up across the country, Hans co-founded the Canadian Blood and Marrow Transplant Group and served as its president for more than a decade. Although he was a driving force behind many of the CBMTG's studies he often let others take center stage. Hans was an early proponent of transplant standards and quality control at the national level, and supported the National Marrow Donor Program as well as the creation of the Canadian unrelated donor registry OneMatch.

Despite authoring over 325 papers and mentoring scores of young transplant physicians, Hans always felt his career's greatest mission and ultimately its most rewarding, was to care for the thousands of patients with leukemia for whom he was the attending physician. His patients universally sensed that unwavering devotion. It was, therefore, no great surprise when I was doing rounds one Monday morning, to see Hans walking across the bridge from an attached hospital, clearly diaphoretic with an intravenous line running antibiotics, only a few, hours after an emergency appendectomy. He was just checking to see that everything was okay and, with his signature impish grin, asked us to please not tell Sandy.

Hans' successes as a scientist, clinician, and administrator, each required an almost super-human investment of time and

effort on top of his innate talents. But beyond the lab the ward and the endless meetings, there was always and foremost his family. First there was Sandra, his wife and best friend. Then came the four kids Anne, Kristy, Andrew and Erica, whose playtime with their dad often took place in the very wee hours of the morning. But the crowning jewels were the 6 grandchildren of an ever enthusiastic 'Opa' with whom the weekends at the cottage were particularly special.

A month before his death, Hans and Sandra travelled to Ottawa to stand one last time in front of the Canadian transplant community and some of its guests from around the world (Mary Horowitz, Sergio Giralt, Mohammed Mohti amongst others) for Hans to receive the lifetime achievement award from his Canadian colleagues. It was an unforgettable scene that stirred the soul and lifted the spirit. Initially disheartened by the frightening physical ravages of advanced cancer on Hans' appearance, his colleagues were astonished by his talk on the outcome of the first 1000 patients transplanted in Canada., His talk that was astounding in its clarity and its insightful messages to a new generation of transplant physicians. In that unforgettable voice, with an unparalleled keenness of mind, Hans defied his illness and addressed his audience as he had done many times before. Without any doubt there had to be this one more talk, this one more conversation amongst

colleagues, this one more idea to test, this one more old friend to greet, this one more encouragement to give. Less than 24 hours later, Hans was back in Toronto as the official to send off the riders on The Ride to Conquer Cancer to raise money for his hospital, an event in which, until the last year, he had been a lead racer on one of this son's custom bikes. He entered hospital that day. In his last few days, he recounted for his children at his bedside and put to paper for family posterity, all that he remembered of his own childhood those many years ago in the chaos and tragedies of the Second World War. According to Sandy, Hans said that he felt he been so fortunate to have gotten so much out of life and that he, in turn, had given all that he could and he had no regrets.

Surrounded by a series of ever enlarging concentric circles of his loving family, the devoted staff of the hospital to which he had dedicated his career, his colleagues and friends, Hans Messner died on July 24, 2018. One would have to say that it was a life profoundly well-lived.

So to you Hans, from us- in Shakespeare's words- "May Flights of Angels sing thee to thy Rest."

*Lothar Huebsch
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