Introducing Laszlo Bito and Johan Stjernschantz, the 2000 Recipients of the Proctor Medal

The Proctor Medal was first awarded to Dr. Jonas Friedenwald in 1949. After Friedenwald, 53 stellar scientists received the Proctor Medal in the past century. I cannot think of a more appropriate way to begin the next century of Proctor Medalists than with the two individuals being honored today, Professors Laszlo Z. Bito and Johan Stjernschantz. It truly is a privilege and a great honor for me to introduce these impeccable scientists to you.

I suspect that almost everyone in this room either personally knows or, at the very least, knows of Laszlo. Over the past 35 years, his presence at the ARVO meetings in the physiology, pharmacology, and/or glaucoma fields were characterized by his frequent, uninhibited, and candid critiques of paper presentations. Laszlo’s rather flamboyant personality has become legendary. On the other hand, I suspect that a much smaller percentage of you know Johan. This soft-spoken researcher rarely makes his presence known at meetings. Nevertheless, the union of these contrasting individuals has resulted in profound contributions to basic scientific and clinical ophthalmology.

Laszlo was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1934, and Johan in Vasa, Finland, in 1947. Whereas Johan remained in Scandinavia for all but a few years of his life, Laszlo fled from Hungary during the revolution, and entered the US at the age of 22. Laszlo received his BA degree from Bard College in New York, and his PhD in Biophysics and Medical Cell Biology at Columbia University. He spent the next 2 years with Professor Hugh Davson, first at the University of Louisville, where Professor Davson was taking a sabbatical, and then in the Department of Physiology at the University College in London. Laszlo then returned to Columbia, where he joined the research faculty in the Department of Ophthalmology, with Professor George Smelser, the 13th Proctor Medalist.

Johan completed medical school at the University of Helsinki but practiced clinical medicine for only 1 year. While in medical school, his interest in basic research began in Professor Arto Palkama’s laboratory. After medical school, he received his doctoral thesis at the University of Helsinki, which included studies with Professor Anders Bill at Uppsala University in Sweden. Johan spent his postdoctoral fellowship with Dr. Bill for 1 year and with Dr. Marvin Sears at Yale University for another 2 years. Johan remained at Yale for an additional year as an Assistant Professor, then returned to Finland. There, he assumed the position of medical director of the Star Pharmaceutical Company for 3 years, before joining Pharmacia Ophthalmics in Uppsala as the Director of Product Development in 1986.

Laszlo and Johan, working independently, had many common or complementary interests, including examining the ocular effects of the cholinergic nervous system and cholinergic drugs; investigating models and mediators of intraocular inflammation, including prostaglandins (PGs), leukotrienes, and neuropeptides; and evaluating the effect of neuropeptides and eicosanoids on ocular blood flow and fluid dynamics. Their mutual research interests resulted in a perfect blend when Laszlo met with Johan within three days after Johan had assumed his position at Pharmacia.

For several years before their collaboration, Laszlo had tried to pursue the PG project with virtually every pharmaceutical company that manufactured ophthalmic drugs, including Pharmacia. Despite Laszlo’s persistence, little progress could be made until Johan joined Pharmacia. As you will hear from Laszlo and Johan, tremendous obstacles had to be overcome, including the preconceived notions by our peers of the potentially harmful effects of PGs. Dr. Anders Bill, a previous recipient of the Friedenwald Memorial Award, and Johan’s mentor, estimated that the PG project had a 5% chance of becoming successful. Laszlo and Johan were able to overcome these seemingly insurmountable odds.

As many of you may know, Hungarians and Finns supposedly have parallel origins, perhaps in Siberia many millennia ago. Many similarities in their languages suggest a prior relationship. However, as alluded to earlier, Laszlo and Johan have quite contrasting personalities. Laszlo is a gregarious and fun-loving free-spirit, whereas Johan is private, reserved, and even-tempered, but with an unexpectedly delightful, wry sense of humor. Johan describes Laszlo as an imaginative, enthusiastic creator, and himself as a skeptical, pessimistic, down-to-earth, narrow-minded “laboratory rat.” Whereas I’ll have to agree with Johan’s assessment of Laszlo, I know that Johan’s description of himself is colored by his profound humility and modesty, two characteristics foreign to Laszlo. In fact, an aphorism posted on the wall of Laszlo’s office describes some basic facts about Laszlo: (1) Laszlo is always right; (2) if you ever find him to be wrong, please see fact number 1.

Despite these “small” differences, these two outstanding scientists share many common traits, including incomparable energy, perseverance, tenacity, determination, resourcefulness, enthusiasm, ingenuity, and honesty. They are perceptive, creative, innovative, and free-thinking. Their studies are exquisitely designed and controlled, and are carried out with compulsiveness and perfection. Both have unending intellectual curiosity and devotion to their scientific work. They are superb teachers who can uniquely motivate their talented students and scientific colleagues.

Four years ago, Johan left industry to join the faculty at Uppsala University, first as an adjunct Professor of Experimental Ophthalmology, and later as a Professor of Pharmacology and Drug Development. He remains very active and productive in the field of PG research as it relates to the eye. On the other hand, Laszlo has “retired” from ophthalmic research, returned to Budapest as his primary residence, and has devoted his inexhaustible energy to writing fictional novels. Some of these novels have become best-sellers in Hungary, and one has been made into a play performed in Budapest.

The Proctor Medal was established to honor great individuals who set unique standards as scientists, scholars, and teachers in eye research. The two great men who are being honored today have provided us with scientific contributions that truly have revolutionized the medical management of our glaucoma patients, who are the primary beneficiaries of the many years of hard work and devotion of our Proctor Medalists. I feel privileged and honored to have had Laszlo and Johan as my teachers, mentors, colleagues, and friends and to have the opportunity of introducing them to you on this momentous occasion.

Carl B. Camras