OBITUARY: Professor Roger Nordmann

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President of ESBRA

Professor Roger Nordmann, founder of the pioneering European Society for Biomedical Research on Alcoholism (ESBRA), passed away on Friday, 24 January 2014. His tireless dedication to the organization calls for a testimony to a remarkable profile of achievement, devotion and action.

Born on 24 May 1926 and raised in the city of Strasbourg, he attended high school at the Lycée Fustel de Coulanges, named after the historian Professor Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges. Here, his extensive participation in the life of prestigious educational foundations began. Nordmann graduated Docteur en Médecine de l’Université de Paris in 1954, having already a diploma from the Institut Pasteur (named after Louis Pasteur and known for its leading biological, anatomical and medical research). He won particular recognition for his thesis, which marked just the beginning of his steps in the study of alcoholism and cancer.

At the young age of 28, after laboratory work as an assistant Biochemist, his talents led him to a rapid promotion as Head of Clinic at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris where he remained until 1955. Three years later, the University of Paris honoured him as a Doctor of Science. His keen interest in disease, microbiology and public health equipped him as a Research Associate at l’Institut National d’Hérmie from 1955 to 1958. As a multilingual, his research (specifically now in the chromatography of amino acids) continued in the heart of London in 1959 at the Russell Group University College London, where he worked in the Department of Biochemistry under Professor Charles Enrique Dent CBE, after whom Dent’s disease was named.

In 1958 he began teaching at the École Nationale de Médecine et de Pharmacie de Poitiers, where he was appointed Professor of Medical Biochemistry in 1962. In 1965, he took the chair in Medical Biochemistry at the University of René Descartes (Faculté de Médecine Paris-Ouest), a university named after the French Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician.

Nordmann’s multitalented and spirited temperament chartered an engaging and broad working life in many fields, retaining numerous responsibilities right up until the end of his wonderful life. From 1965 until 1995, he was the Director of Research into Alcoholism at the Laboratory of Biochemistry in École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in Paris, a top-ranking college, specializing in postgraduate studies and renowned for both its scientific discoveries and the various scholars who have climbed its steps. Here, Nordmann fronted strenuous research into alcohol and addiction, focusing eventually on the involvement of free radicals, and establishing their effects in the toxicity of ethanol on the liver and central nervous system.

Reflecting his later philanthropic work, he took eager interest in therapies and preventative measures for alcoholism and alcohol’s effects on the body. His gift of leadership saw the founding of the Société Française d’Alcoologie where he was a key member of the Board of Directors until 2002, as well as his role in ESBRA. He sat on several panels including that of the International Society for Biomedical Research on Alcoholism (ISBRA), Société de Biologie (1990–2001), the Haut Comité d’Étude et d’Information sur l’Alcoolisme 1986–1992 and from 1992 the Commission Permanente Alcool et Santé Publique du Haut Comité de la Santé Publique (HCSP). His membership, chairmanship and opinions were highly sought, reflecting his interdisciplinary strengths and passions. He presided over a numerous Committees, well into our current century, as a member of the National Academy of Medicine in Paris.

Nordmann was keen on spreading awareness and sharing his wisdom. His publications number an incredible 331, including 166 original publications in French or foreign journals, 68 journal articles and 97 conference papers and symposia. He was a natural speaker, presenter and teacher, participating in various forums into the later years of his life, such as the Council of Moderation and Prevention (2009 onwards) and the Alcohol Prevention Alliance (2010 onwards). He was an opportunist and seized every chance to commit himself to his work, his colleagues and his community. Other campaigns he took on included the “Fight Again Alcoholism” of the National Academy of Medicine.

He was awarded two supreme honours of the French State: Officier de l’Ordre National de la Légion d’Honneur and Officier de l’Ordre des Palmes Académiques.

He was known worldwide by educational institutions, and endowed with honorary titles at the Universities of Genoa and Prague. However, his most inspiring role was arguably his founding and presidency of ESBRA, bringing together academics, ideas, journals and leading researchers across the borders of Europe. The Society has won wide recognition, hosting conferences and creating prestigious medical award titles such as the Nordmann Award in 1990. His death in
January 2014 was unexpected. He died in his home country, when on his way to the Academy of Medicine.

I met Roger at the first time on the opposite end of our earth on the Australian Gold Coast at an ISBRA Congress. Later, we climbed together on Ayers Rock, we spoke about society, free radicals and looking into sunshine. Over the last 20 years we met in various places in Europe sometimes over a glass of good red French wine. I received the last letter from Roger with Christmas greetings and ideas for Nordmann Award 2014 to be held in Sofia in September.

We will miss him. We lost our founder, friend and colleague but Roger is still alive in our minds.