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IN MEMORIAM

Torgny H. Svensson

May 15th 1945 – June 12th 2020

Obituary

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With great sadness, we report that Professor Torgny H. Svensson passed away due to covid-19 earlier this summer. He died on Friday, 12 June 2020 after a short period of illness.

Torgny Svensson was born on 15 May 1945 in Gothenburg, where he grew up and completed his medical training. He became a PhD student at the Department of Pharmacology, with the world-leading psychopharmacologist and later Nobel Laureate Arvid Carlsson as the supervisor. After defending his thesis in 1971, he became a postdoc at Yale University in the group of George K. Aghajanian, another world authority in the field. Here he acquired the electrophysiological technique he then successfully applied to an extensive range of psychopharmacological issues.

After returning to the Department of Pharmacology in Gothenburg Sweden, he formed his own research group and supervised his first doctoral students. After being a visiting scientist at another internationally leading laboratory, that of Floyd Bloom at Salk Institute in La Jolla, he obtained a professorship in pharmacology at the Karolinska Institute (KI) at the age of 38. With the exception of another stay abroad, at Université de Lyon (1989), he spent the rest of his professional life at KI. In total, 21 PhD students defended their thesis under Torgny's supervision.

Torgny pursued the legacy of Arvid Carlsson brilliantly and was early internationally recognised for his scientific contributions regarding how the activity of the brain's catecholaminergic neurons is regulated and modulated by drugs and addictive substances. In recent decades, he mainly focussed on possible ways to enhance the therapeutic effect of antidepressants and antipsychotic drugs.

Torgny made significant contributions to the scientific community also outside of his own research. For 6 years (2000–2005), he was the President of the Scandinavian College of Neuropsychopharmacology (SCNP). Torgny envisioned an international role for the society, and developed its current international profile, including a name change from 'Skandinavisk Selskab for Psykofarmakologi' to 'Scandinavian College of Neuropsychopharmacology'. Under his leadership, the language of the annual meetings was changed to English, making it possible to attract high-profiled international scientists, which was also facilitated by the visionary move of the meetings from cold Scandinavia to the Southern of France. During these years, SCNP flourished, attracting higher attendance – more than 700 delegates – than ever before to the annual congresses.

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Torgny also served as president (2006–2008) of the only global organisation for psychopharmacology – International College of Neuropsychopharmacology (CINP). For two decades, he was also a member of the Nobel Assembly at Karolinska Institutet.

Torgny Svensson appreciated the theoretical aspects of research, but at the same time, his thinking and activities were always permeated by the ambition to improve the situation for patients with mental illness. Clinical relevance was always important to him.

He received numerous awards for his research, such as the ECNP-Lilly Neuroscience Award, in 2000, and – as late as 2020 – the prestigious CINP Pioneer Award.

Torgny Svensson was a central person in Scandinavian pharmacological research and had a vast international contact network. He combined an impressive analytical ability and a genuine interest in the scientific issues with good spirits and a sometimes drastic sense of humor – even during the most serious and complicated scientific discussions, his ability to attract laughter was never far away. Psychopharmacology will be more boring without him.

The international psychopharmacology has lost a leader and we, his friends, an always enthusiastic discussion partner.

Torgny is survived by his wife Louise and three adult children Jenny, Martin, and Michael, as well as grandchildren.

On the initiative of Torgny's former PhD students and colleagues, we will initiate a scientific prize, The Torgny H. Svensson Award, in his honor. This award will be announced in connection to the annual SCNP conference and the recipient will be invited to give a lecture.

Sophie Erhardt (President, SCNP),
Elias Eriksson (Secretary, CINP),
Göran Engberg,
Gregers Wegener (Past-president, SCNP)

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