Obituary

Volkmar Paeslack

Professor Dr Volkmar Paeslack, honorary member of the International Medical Society of Paraplegia (IMSOP) and director from 1964–1995, of the Department for Treatment and Rehabilitation of Spinal Injury Patients at the Orthopedic Clinic of Heidelberg University, died unexpectedly on 19th September, 1998.

Volkmar Paeslack was born on 24th July, 1925 in Berlin. He was wounded during the war and returned from prisoner-of-war captivity in 1945 to begin his medical studies. In 1951 he obtained his doctorate and subsequently specialized in internal medicine. He became active at this time as consultant at the Spinal Injuries Department of the Orthopedic Clinic. The clinic's director, Professor Dr Kurt Lindemann, conferred on him the position of assistant medical director. Between 1962 and 1964 there followed two several-month stays at the National Spinal Injuries Centre of the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, England. In addition to gaining further experience, Paeslack became a life-long friend of Sir Ludwig

Guttmann and Dr Lorenz Michaelis. His first publications in the area of spinal injuries appeared at this time.

In 1963 he qualified as university lecturer with the treatise 'Internal Disturbances of Paraplegics (Internistische Störungen beim Paraplegiker)'. In 1967, under his direction, the first spinal-injuries center at a German university was opened, with Sir Ludwig Guttmann present. In 1970 he was awarded a professorship, and in 1974 he accepted the first chair for rehabilitation medicine created at a German university. Paeslack's department developed into one of the leading spinal-injuries centers in Europe and elsewhere. Guttmann always referred to Paeslack as one of his most successful pupils. The clinical section of the center bears Guttmann's name. Paeslack felt a special and lasting indebtedness to the Guttmann school. He not only placed great emphasis on the value of conservative approaches, but in addition, he emphasized particularly the priority of life-supporting and life-determining acute treatment of the vital functions and the significance of the inner organs for life-expectancy in general. He showed critical interest in new therapies, emphasized the special importance of physiotherapy, ergotherapy and sport-therapy. He was particularly committed to social matters, especially questions concerning sexuality. In the Department for Occupational Reintegration (Kurt-Lindemann-Haus) he focused particular attention on the needs of tetraplegics. For children he developed special in-patient treatment in suitable surroundings and championed improvements in life-long aftercare for patients with spina bifida surviving to adult age. He developed concepts such as 'rehabilitation of the first hour' and 'rehabilitation of the individual' in the context of a 'comprehensive rehabilitation'. More than 300 book titles, treaties, papers, and lectures bear witness to the breadth of his activities, his critical views, his comprehensive medical and general knowledge, his humanistic and humane character. He pointed out deficits in rehabilitation policies to doctors, welfare officers, administrators, and politicians. For people everywhere, he was a sought-after counsellor, most especially for his patients, who showed him great trust and honor.

From the very beginning, he was a member of the editorial board of the journal *Paraplegia* (*Spinal Cord*) and member of the IMSOP. He became council member of the IMSOP board of directors, vice-president, and finally its president from 1977 to 1981. In Heidelberg in 1972 he organized the 'Annual Scientific Meeting' and the 'Paralympics'. In 1985 he

was elected founding chairman of the 'German Speaking Medical Society for Paraplegia' (DMGP- 'Deutschsprachige Medizinische Gesellschaft für Paraplegie'), which came into being that year. He remained a member of the DMGP's scientific advisory board until his death. In 1993, the DMGP awarded Paeslack for his life's work the 'Ludwig Guttman Prize'. In 1989, by order of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Society, he advised the local authorities in Armenia for the planning and building of a spinal-injuries center after that country had been devastated by an earthquake.

In 1995 the President of Germany decorated Paeslack with the Distinguished Service Cross of the Federal Republic of Germany. Treatment of spinal injuries has become the model for rehabilitation in Germany in general. The development in spinal injury

treatment is inseparably connected to the work of Volkmar Paeslack. It was his clear thinking, his untiring dedication, his talent, his kindness and amiability, his respect for the dignity of other people that brought him the gratitude and long-lasting friendship of patients, students, co-workers, and fellow doctors. The void can already be felt that he left behind.

We would like to express our deepest sympathy especially for his wife and his two daughters. There may be some comfort in the fact that Volkmar Paeslack himself placed the best of memorials in the hearts of many people. He will remain in grateful remembrance to all those who were privileged to meet him.

Hans Jürgen Gerner
Friedrich-Wilhelm Meinecke