



IN MEMORIAM

Alec Coppen

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Alec Coppen, MD, DSc, FRCP, FRCPsych. (Hon)

Friends and colleagues of Alec Coppen are saddened by the news of his death, at the great age of 96, earlier this year. Alec was an outstanding clinical psychopharmacologist who enriched the research in the field of biological psychiatry and psychopharmacology internationally. This was achieved through his leadership of both national and international institutions and organizations. He was an emeritus member of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology (ACNP).

Alec was the distinguished director of the Medical Council unit for Neuropsychiatric research in Epsom, Surrey, UK, which was the UK designated World Health Organization (WHO) centre for research and training in Biological Psychiatry, a position he occupied for 20 years. He was a founder member of the influential British Association of Psychopharmacology, in which he served as president from 1976 to 1978, and president of the International College of Neuropsychopharmacology (CINP) from 1988 to 1990. During his presidency of the CINP, he stimulated the international impact of the organization by broadening the basis of its programs and by the establishment of an educational program in psychopharmacology, which was primarily aimed at mental health professionals in developing countries.

Space does not permit me to detail the numerous honors and awards which Alec received during his long professional career, but a few examples will serve to illustrate this. He received the lifetime achievement award from the BAP in 1998, and the pioneer in psychopharmacology award from the CINP in 2000.

In 1982, he was made a distinguished fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1995. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to psychiatry and mental health research, the City of London made him a Freeman of the City in 1981, a distinction which few professional mental health workers have achieved!

In reviewing the numerous contributions which Alec has made, and which resulted in over 400 publications, his contribution to the establishment of the serotonin theory of depression was the most influential contribution. The serotonin theory was published in a seminal paper in the *Lancet* in 1963 and showed that tryptophan potentiated the antidepressant action of monoamine oxidase inhibitors. Further research in the Epsom unit demonstrated that plasma-free tryptophan was reduced in depressed patients, while in the brain of those who committed suicide there was a reduction in both serotonin and its main metabolite 5-hydroxyindole acetic acid. These, and related studies by the Epsom unit, were crucial to the establishment of the serotonin theory of depression. Other important studies under the leadership of Alec included a critical evaluation of the dexamethasone depression test (DST) which, at that time, was being considered as a useful test for major depression. The Epsom group showed that the DST was not specific for depression, and was also abnormal in patients with schizophrenia, dementia and alcoholism!

Besides his role as a mentor for young researchers, Alec was always enthusiastic in promoting the proper treatment of mood disorders which was reflected in the significant contributions he made to the guidelines for treatments published by the WHO and the CINP.

Alec Coppen was not only a highly regarded and popular professional biological psychiatrist, but also a warm, friendly person with a unique sense of humor. Age and ill health limited his travels to international meetings in recent years, but those of us who were fortunate to be present at the CINP program planning committee in Sweden in 2013 were delighted to see Alec in excellent form for the celebration of his 90th birthday. He will be deeply missed by his family, colleagues, and numerous friends. May he rest in peace!

¹Emeritus Professor of Pharmacology, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland
Correspondence: Brian E. Leonard (psycholeonard@googlemail.com)

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