

## INSIGHTS



# In memory of Prof. Dr. Hans Versmold

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We deeply mourn the loss of Prof. Emeritus Hans T. Versmold, who died on September 27, 2021. He was Professor for Pediatrics and Director of the Children's Clinic of the Benjamin Franklin Hospital, Free University of Berlin from 1990 to 2003, and most importantly for us (MMO and GL) our dear friend and colleague, and for us (EM, MZ, CCR), also an extraordinary teacher and role model.

Hans Versmold was the son of a doctor and a midwife, and was born on May 18, 1937, in Gotha. After his state exam in Munich, he began his research career in Biochemistry as a scholar of the German Research Council from 1965 to 1967, before starting his fellowship as a pediatrician at von Hauner's children's hospital. This was the identifiable budding of his professional life that would prosper in three realms—in Munich, Berlin, and the global domain where his locally bred talents served the rapidly expanding world of neonatology.

In Munich, he met Prof. Klaus Riegel, one of the founding fathers of neonatology in Germany, with whom he collaborated on studies of neonatal blood oxygen transport, which became a lifetime fascination. After Versmold's habilitation in Munich in 1975, he was a visiting professor at the Cardiovascular Research Institute in San Francisco from 1977 to 1978, where he fostered new research collaborations and longstanding friendships. He then was appointed head of the Neonatal Department at the Großhadern Clinic of the Ludwig Maximilian University in 1980. It was in San Francisco and in Munich that his engaging style and affinity for colleagues combined with his critical thought became the hallmarks of his leadership and expression of his remarkable skills as a clinician and teacher. Following Versmold's leadership at Großhadern, he was appointed in 1990, to the newly created professorship for Pediatrics at the Benjamin Franklin Hospital of the Free University of Berlin. By using his unique sense of collaboration and patient-centered quality management, he rapidly developed the Pediatric Department into a leading Perinatal center together with Professor Hans Weitzel (Obstetrics) and Professor Jürgen Waldschmidt (Pediatric Surgery).

Prof. Versmold understood in an incomparable way how to transfer research results into daily medical work. And that started first and foremost with an attitude! Diagnosis and therapy concepts should not be based on plausibility or opinions, but on facts. Residents, fellows and nurses learned evidence-based neonatology in every visit, every discussion.

Young colleagues were encouraged and instructed to improve neonatology themselves with research results. Due to his longstanding scientific experience, his razor-sharp mind and

critical oversight, many relevant unresolved scientific issues in neonatology, such as oxygen consumption during kangaroo care, potassium metabolism of the premature infant, development of the immature immune system, were identified. In these scientific endeavors, as well as during the writing of the results, Prof. Versmold was extremely stringent and strict. Manuscripts that were to bear his author's name would have been edited many times and repeatedly subjected to critical scrutiny.

What characterized his personal style was Hans Versmold's capacity to approach his teaching with wit, rigor and seriousness of purpose. He sustained the attention of those engaged in patient care as well as the parents of his patients, and he recognized and acknowledged the important value of questions and contributions from each member of the clinical team. He had the intuitive skill and scientific acuity to recognize the importance of subtle findings that might be easy to overlook but needed to be reconciled. Thus, his team always enjoyed the lively discussions during his morning rounds, even when they lasted past morning.

This drive for understanding was equally apparent during his professional life outside of the clinic, particularly in pediatric research meetings. Among other signs of the respect he garnered, he was elected as a Council Member of the European Society for Paediatric Research and held treasured membership to a group of colleagues that spanned the globe, known as the International Perinatal Collegium. He had a rich array of friends and a remarkable knack of bringing colleagues together for serious discussion or for humorous reflection, a talent that was also manifest in his extensive photographic collection of international neonatologists in the Collegium often sporting a long stem flower in their bite (Fig. 1), as shown on pages 39–41 in the brochure of the 50th Anniversary of the European Society for Paediatric Research ([https://www.espr.eu/about/the\\_espr\\_through\\_time.php](https://www.espr.eu/about/the_espr_through_time.php)). With a self-effacing twinkle, when queried about the purpose of these semi-candid photos he quickly proposed two questions and methods as if it were part of a rigorous study; then as quickly he confessed that these had no scientific value but were a valuable sign of fellowship.

The adulation and affection for his charismatic style was readily apparent when, at his 60th birthday, his residents showered him with original lyrics to the Beatles "When I'm Sixty Four" and an equally clever rap song mocking the morning routine of his rounds. Similarly, this affection was apparent in the celebratory piece written by one of us for his 75th birthday (EM).<sup>1</sup> Admiration

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**Fig. 1 Hans Versmold at a Perinatal Collegium.** Semi-candid photograph.

and fellowship also flowed freely when he and peers banter over data and interpretation in an open forum.

When not directly engaged in clinical or administrative responsibilities, but perhaps relaxed over a beer, he demonstrated his warmth, his rich sense of humor, his probing intellect, his esthetic sensibilities, and his utter devotion to his wife, his daughters and his granddaughters.

The Charité Faculty and Pediatrics will honor Hans Versmold as a distinguished university professor who will always be remembered by everyone who knew him. He was an extraordinary man

of the world of neonatology and a symbol of commitment and excellence for us all.

## REFERENCE

1. Mildenberger, E. Z. *Geburtshilfe Neonatol.* **216**, 233–234, <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0032-1323728> (2012).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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