



Professor Jerzy Maj, M.D., Ph.D.
(1922–2003)

OBITUARY

On 9 February 2003 we became irretrievably bereaved of Professor Jerzy Maj, M.D., Ph.D., Doctor Honoris Causa Mult., a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), an active member of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAU), co-organizer and past director of the Institute of Pharmacology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków, chairman of many years' standing of the Institute's Scientific Council and this journal's Advisory Board. There passed away one of the nestors of Polish pharmacology, the creator and indisputable leader of the Polish school of neuropsychopharmacology, an untiring organizer of science and scientific life, an extraordinary yet modest Man.

Professor Jerzy Maj started his scientific activity in 1950 as a research assistant in the Department of Pharmacodynamics of the Medical Academy in Kraków. At the very beginning of that career he was engaged for a short time in studying hypotensive drugs and in shock pharmacology. Very soon, however, at the end of the fifties – having rightly

anticipated the significance and future of the then developing modern psychopharmacology – he focused his interest and attention on this very discipline. He undertook studies that were then pioneering not only in Poland but also worldwide.

Professor J. Maj's personal contribution to world science is reflat in a great number of important discoveries and findings in the area of pharmacology of neuro- and psychotropic drugs, and pharmacology of various brain neurotransmitter systems. Among others, Professor J. Maj propounded two original hypotheses about the mechanism of action of antidepressant drugs (the increased reactivity of central α_1 -adrenergic receptors, and the elevated reactivity and affinity for agonists of brain dopamine D_2 and D_3 receptors). He described the pharmacological profile of a number of classic and atypical antidepressant drugs, for which he was awarded a prestigious prize by the international Anna Monika Foundation. He detected central effects of different types, including the psychotropic

activity, of numerous ligands of serotonin and dopamine receptors, ligands of excitatory amino acid receptors, ligands of 'sigma' receptors, calcium channel antagonists, monoamine oxidase and catechol-O-methyltransferase inhibitors.

These are only a few examples of the more important directions of studies conducted by Professor J. Maj; their results are the subject of nearly 500 publications, including ca. 260 original papers.

Professor J. Maj's scientific output, achievements and directions of studies were extensively discussed in two articles published recently on the occasion of his 75th birthday and 50th anniversary of scientific activity [1, 2].

His huge scientific output undoubtedly laid down a basis for his position as a scientist of extremely high repute both in Poland and worldwide. As has already been mentioned above, he was undisputed founder and leader of the Polish school of neuropsychopharmacology. In this discipline he conferred 27 doctor's degrees and supervised 9 theses presented to qualify for assistant-professorship (habilitation theses). He plotted the same direction for the Department of Pharmacology of the Medical Academy in Lublin, which he headed in mid-sixties, and above all for the Institute of Pharmacology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków of which he was director for 15 years. It was at the time of his directorship (1977–1992) that the Institute became a leading research center in Poland, which was also highly appreciated in Europe as an institution conducting studies in the field of neuro- and psychopharmacology. The Institute of Pharmacology owes Professor J. Maj its dynamic development, especially as regards growing number of staff, the enriched methodology, and the development of wide international contacts – not easy at that time – in particular with a number of German partners.

All these and many other actions performed by Professor J. Maj for the benefit of the Institute, his widely appreciated scientific achievements, as well as his unusual personality characterized by exceptional diligence, honesty and responsibility, being very demanding of his collaborators and – above all – of himself, his fair evaluation of people and at the same time very kind attitude towards them, made him win widespread praise and respect of his nearest coworkers – both these more experienced and those at the start of their scientific career.

Professor J. Maj also rendered invaluable services to the organization of research and scientific life outside the Institute. In the seventies and eighties he coordinated practically all the research in the field of pharmacology and medicinal chemistry of the central nervous system, carried out in Poland. Numerous initiatives of his launched at that time, e.g., spring conferences, later transformed into the Days of Neuropsychopharmacology (organized by the Silesian colleagues), have been continued to date. Professor J. Maj was very active in different bodies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, including its three committees; moreover, for two terms of office he had chaired the Commission of Pharmacology of the Committee on Physiological Sciences. For more than 20 years he had been a member of the Central Commission for Scientific Titles and Degrees. He was a member of the Scientific Councils of a few governmental institutes and institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Professor J. Maj was a charter member of the Polish Pharmacological Society and its chairman; for several terms of office he had also held other executive functions in it. It was mainly thanks to him that the Society has established numerous international contacts (especially with the German and the Hungarian Pharmacological Societies) and has introduced a number of new forms of activity.

Professor J. Maj devoted his meticulous attention to the scientific periodical published by the Institute: the Polish Journal of Pharmacology, of which he was editor-in-chief for some time and whose Editorial Board he had chaired for the last 30 years.

He had always been performing all those functions with exceptional involvement, launching various initiatives of his own and usually taking on the whole burden of their implementation.

Frequent and numerous invitations extended to Professor J. Maj to take part as a lecturer or a session chairman in reputable congresses and symposia, as well as to give lectures at prestigious European universities, institutes and industrial laboratories, his participation in editorial boards of six international scientific journals of renown, and – last but not least – his executive duties in the International Union of Pharmacological Societies (IUPHAR) and the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology (ECNP) testify to his great international renown as a scientist.

In recognition of the role and significance of his achievements in Poland and abroad, numerous honors were bestowed on Professor J. Maj; he was also awarded innumerable prizes and distinctions. Professor J. Maj was a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and an active member of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAU). The Medical Academy in Lublin and the Semmelweis University in Budapest conferred a title of Doctor *Honoris Causa* on him. Professor Maj was also an honorary member of the Polish, Hungarian and German Pharmacological Societies and of the German Society for Biological Psychiatry. In recent years he was presented an honorary diploma of the European Union of Pharmacological Societies.

Apart from the already mentioned Anna Monika Foundation prize, Professor J. Maj received other prestigious scientific awards, e.g., Poland's Prime Minister's prize for his entire scientific activity, and – several times – the prizes of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare.

Among the numerous medals and signs of honor that Professor J. Maj was awarded, there were such as the Copernicus medal, the Knight's, Officer's and Commander's Crosses of the *Polonia Restituta* order, as well as the Federal Republic of Germany's Cross of Merit with ribbon. The latter honor was bestowed on him by Germany's President as a mark of appreciation of his meritorious

services in support of the Polish-German reconciliation.

Professor J. Maj devoted all his industrious life to science and to diverse activities in support of science, as well as to other forms of social activity. He also always displayed ardent patriotism. During the 2nd World War, being a soldier of the Polish Underground State, he fought by force of arms with the Nazi occupant in the ranks of the Home Army (AK). It was then that he was wounded, the consequences of which he had suffered for the rest of his life.

The death of Professor J. Maj is a severe and painful loss not only to his nearest and dearest, his friends, and the Institute of Pharmacology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków. We have been irrevocably bereaved of an eminent Scientist, Man of great knowledge and experience, who was extremely kind and candid with other people and the world. Many of us have lost our best Master and Teacher.

Edmund Przegaliński
Jerzy Vetulani

REFERENCES

1. Professor Jerzy Maj. On his 75th birthday. *Pol. J. Pharmacol.*, 1997, 49, 271–276.
2. Professor Jerzy Maj – the 50th anniversary of his scientific activity. *Pol. J. Pharmacol.*, 2000, 52, 1–2.