

Obituary

Wilhelm Tönnis, 1898—1978



Wilhelm Tönnis, one of the most outstanding neurosurgeons in Europe and the world, passed away on 12 September 1978. He was born on 16 June 1898 in Dortmund-Kley. Throughout his life he remained a true Westfalian, unable to disavow his birth on a large farm.

Wilhelm Tönnis was able to celebrate his 80th birthday together with his friends, students, and former associates in Cologne on 16 June 1978, a few months before his death. On the same day, he received the great distinction of honorary doctorate of the medical faculty of the University of Cologne, to which he had belonged for almost two decades up to his retirement. This special honour from the University of Cologne, which he had served as Dean of the Medical Faculty and as Vice-Chancellor, was for Tönnis the last highlight in his academic career, shortly before his death. He was very deeply touched, although he had received many great distinctions and tributes during the course of his life.

Tönnis first became acquainted with neurosurgery when he went to Stockholm in 1932 to work with Herbert Olivecrona as a Rockefeller stipendiary. As early as 1937, Tönnis held the first German chair of Neurosurgery in Berlin. Systematic work with the patients in the wards and in the operating theatre was complemented by direct collaboration with Hugo Spatz, Director of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute (later Max-Planck Institute) for Brain Research in Berlin-Buch. This is a vivid example of the fruitful relationship between brain research and neurosurgery. Tönnis became head of the Division for Tumour Research and Experimental Pathology of the Brain within this Institute.

A period of widespread clinical and experimental research began with the appearance of fundamental publications on intracranial hypertension, brain oedema, diseases of cerebral circulation, tumours, and vascular malformations of the brain. Through his research and his successful work in surgery, Tönnis gained worldwide recognition within a few years. As one of the youngest neurosurgeons in the world, Wilhelm Tönnis became in 1936 editor of the "Zentralblatt für Neurochirurgie", Johann Ambrosius Barth, Leipzig, the only specialized journal on neurosurgery at that time. The "Zentralblatt für Neurochirurgie" was well-known all over the world. The journal could not be sent across the Atlantic after 1939, which may be one of the main reasons for the foundation of the American "Journal of Neurosurgery", the first issue of which appeared in January 1944.

Although the Second World War slowed down his career in certain respects, Tönnis devoted his efforts to the study of injuries to the brain, spinal cord, and peripheral nerves. With phenomenal organizational ability, he established the basic principles for the care of the injured from the moment of injury until their rehabilitation. Accumulated experience during this period constituted the basis for the treatment of craniocerebral injuries for many years. Following the War, the buildings where Tönnis had worked were no longer

standing. In 1946, Tönnis began the rebuilding of the Department for General Surgery, Trauma Surgery, and Neurosurgery at the Miners' Association Hospital in Bochum-Langendreer, until 1948 when he accepted the newly created Chair of Neurosurgery in Cologne. With his extraordinary dynamism, he built up his new clinic in accordance with his own high standing as clinician, scientist, and teacher. He worked tirelessly and fruitfully here until his retirement as professor emeritus in 1968.

Patients and pupils from all over the world came to Cologne to see Wilhelm Tönnis, a testimony to his unequalled qualities as physician and teacher. The teacher-pupil relationship between Olivecrona and Tönnis became a firm friendship, an expression of which is the "Handbuch der Neurochirurgie" (Handbook of Neurosurgery), Springer Berlin-Heidelberg-New York, which they edited jointly. Tönnis concentrated his efforts on the classification of head injuries, on the symptomatology, diagnosis, and therapy of tumours, and on vascular malformations of the brain. At the same time, he made personal efforts to ensure that neurosurgery became a well-known and independent specialty: he helped to found the German Society for Neurosurgery, which owes him so much. The homage paid to him from all over the world gives a more vivid testimony to his merits than words alone can do. Wilhelm Tönnis was a honorary member of numerous national and international medical societies, honorary doctor of several foreign universities (most recently of the University of Cologne, the main place at which he worked) and recipient of the Otfried-Foerster Medal, the Erb Medal, the Harvey Cushing Medal, the Paracelsus Medal, and the Walter-Poppelreuter Medal.

His contributions to the development of neurosurgery in Germany, in Europe, and throughout the world cannot be overstated. The German Society for Neurosurgery, his friends, and students have not only lost a powerful promotor of neurosurgery, but a father, friend, and guiding light. The European Association of Neurosurgical Societies, in whose name we are speaking, has lost one of its most outstanding personalities. All neurosurgeons in Germany, in Europe, and all over the world will remember him with the utmost respect.

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