

Obituary Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Weiss (1946–2021)

Anna A. Friedl¹ · Florian Gering² · Kazunori Kodama³ · Ferid Shannoun⁴ · Emilie van Deventer⁵

© Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, part of Springer Nature 2021

With great sadness, we learned that Wolfgang Weiss passed away on 4 June 2021. Over the years, we have had abundant opportunities to discuss with him, see his ideas taking form, and benefit from his vast experience and huge international network. Some of us talked to him even a few days before his death. Wolfgang Weiss was an outstanding luminary in the field of radiation protection and a dear colleague and friend. To honour him, we chose to share our memories with the readers of Radiation and Environmental Biophysics.

Anna Friedl

Wolfgang Weiss was the head of the German delegation to United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) when I became a member of the delegation in 2007. I remember being impressed by him knowing so many delegates from many countries well enough to start deep technical discussions immediately after saying hello—and by the vast area of topics, he was able to cover. His comprehensive knowledge on a variety of subjects was matched by his great political mind which, I think, drew from his great understanding of people and his empathy. This empathy certainly was an asset when, as Chair of UNSCEAR, he became deeply involved in the evaluation of the effects of the accident at the nuclear power plant

accident following the great east-Japan earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. When he talked about his many visits to Japan, he always mentioned the concerns and fears of the people. Recognizing the importance of risk and crisis communication, he did not tire of reminding his colleagues of the necessity of constant training in this area, in order to be prepared when emergency situations arise. Indeed, following his suggestion, I was attending the WHO opening plenary of the global ad hoc conference on communicating science during health emergencies when I received the message that Wolfgang had passed away.

Lessons learned from the accident at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant also played an important role for him when Wolfgang was, from 2013 to 2018, a member of the German Commission on Radiological Protection (SSK) and since 2019, a member of the SSK Crisis Management Group. But he was not only an expert for emergency preparedness, but also for medical applications of radiation, for non-ionizing radiation and, essentially, everything related to radiation protection. When he wanted you to understand the importance of something, he would look deeply into your eyes, and when he thought some situation should be improved, some action be taken or some work be done, more often than not he would succeed with his kind, but determined, manner.

The German radiation protection community—and I—will miss his advice, support and energy, and also stories of grandchildren and bonsais.

✉ Anna A. Friedl
Anna.Friedl@lrz.uni-muenchen.de

¹ University Hospital, Ludwig-Maximilians-University LMU Munich, Munich, Germany

² Federal Office for Radiation Protection (BfS), Munich, Germany

³ Radiation Effects Research Foundation, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan

⁴ United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, Vienna, Austria

⁵ Radiation and Health Unit, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

Florian Gering

Wolfgang Weiss was a great inspiration for me over the past 25 years. When I started to work in the field of emergency preparedness and response (EPR) in 1996, it became immediately clear to me that Wolfgang was one of the leading experts in this field worldwide. But it took me several years—simply because my own focus was too narrow—to understand that his reputation was acknowledged not only in

EPR, but similarly in many other areas of radiation protection. Just as an example, even as Wolfgang actively took part in international negotiations regarding the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, he was an active member in (and even chair of) several ICRP task groups. Not much later he also initiated international research activities in various areas of radiation protection! It was always a great mystery to me, how he could do all this work in parallel, while heading an institute and later, even a full department at the Federal Office for Radiation Protection (BfS). His activities would have easily filled the working day of several “normal” people ... he appeared to have endless energy.

In the 90s (and also later on), Wolfgang played a key role in defining and implementing several EURATOM research programs, in the fields of emergency preparedness, low-dose radiation risk research and also radiobiology. He also laid the foundation for international platforms such as MELODI and NERIS, which probably would not exist without his support. It would be hard for any German or even European professional peer to match the length and depth of Wolfgang’s participation in numerous international expert groups, working parties, organizations and committees over many decades. His participation was always full-fledged, not nominal. He was active and engaged, whether it was pushing a group forward, setting new goals, bringing up new ideas, starting new areas of work and writing down comprehensive conclusions and brilliant ideas for future research.

For the EPR area specifically, he was the one who inspired, guided and helped to address many open questions. While his focus was more on the practical aspects of EPR (e.g., within several EURATOM research projects in the 90s, which he helped to define, initiate and bring to successful results), he later addressed new topics like lessons learned from the nuclear power plant accident in Japan, or the rather new area of non-radiological health impact of radiation emergencies.

For many of us, Wolfgang was always a source of wise counsel and support and it will be difficult for us to accept that Wolfgang will no longer be there when we next need his leadership, expertise, help and advice.

His loss is keenly felt by so many in the Radiation Protection Community, who knew him, worked together with him and were inspired by him over so many years! Many of us have benefitted from his friendship and support, something that will never be forgotten!

Kazunori Kodama

Wolfgang Weiss, who I considered a good friend, was an irreplaceable figure in our field, as someone who maintained a strong commitment to science and its applications

for the benefit of the world’s people. I truly feel privileged to have been able to work closely with him over many years. We first came to know each other when I became a member of the Japanese delegation to United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) in 2004 and an alternate representative in 2010. Around the same time, Wolfgang was a member of the German delegation to UNSCEAR and subsequently became its representative.

In 2011, Wolfgang was elected as chair of UNSCEAR, at which time it was decided that a report would be prepared on the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station. For that report, he served as chair of the coordination expert group and I was invited to serve as technical adviser. In retrospect, this marked the beginning of my close collaboration with Wolfgang. Following intensive, dedicated work provided by numerous experts, UNSCEAR published its Fukushima report as the UNSCEAR 2013 Report.¹ It is no doubt that Wolfgang’s decisive leadership led the way to successful completion of the report on the Fukushima situation.

Our collaboration did not end with the publication of the UNSCEAR 2013 Report. Fortunately, we were able to continue to collaborate in the Fukushima follow-up program, a project for which Wolfgang served as a senior technical adviser. After dedicated work provided by the project manager, critical reviewers, members of the expert group and Japanese working group, as well as the UNSCEAR secretariat, our deliberations were summarized and published in three UNSCEAR White Papers.¹

In 2020, by summarizing findings reported in the three UNSCEAR White Papers and by adding newer findings, UNSCEAR published its second Fukushima report as UNSCEAR 2020 Report.¹ For this publication, Wolfgang also served as senior technical adviser and, here again, his decisive leadership led the way to successful completion of the report.

Over the past 10 years, I had opportunities to meet with him in locales around the world, such as Vienna, Geneva, Würzburg, Tokyo and Fukushima. It was always a great pleasure to see and enjoy conversation with him, sometimes in the evenings over a cold beer. Although his passing is indeed a profound loss for me, thanks to Wolfgang, these past 10 years were indeed a fruitful and productive time for me and, without doubt, will remain a fond memory for the rest of my life.

May his soul rest in peace.

¹ <http://www.unscear.org/unscear/en/publications>.

Ferid Shannoun

It is hard to believe that I am writing this in memory of Wolfgang Weiss. My memories with him go far back that I have even forgotten when it was that we first met. I have interacted with him professionally so many times over the years, in his many different capacities. Yet, when I sit down to write, what comes first to mind is Wolfgang the person, his warm smiles and cordiality.

His towering achievements are well known in the field of international radiation protection; be it at the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), the International Radiation Protection Association (IRPA), the International Agency of Atomic Energy (IAEA), the International Commission for Radiation Protection (ICRP), the World Health Organization (WHO) or at the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR). Wolfgang impressed with his knowledge of the complexity and consequences of radiation science and protection. He was a great “radiation” politician, acting first and foremost for the people and the environment. I recall his support to the WHO International Radon Project, which resulted in the WHO Radon Handbook on residential exposure.² Always generous in sharing and mentoring, he introduced me to key actors in this field which helped to present the WHO recommendations at different occasions including the ICRP meeting in Porto, Portugal (2009), which was the first in a long series. On another subject, Wolfgang was engaged in many international conferences such as the IAEA/WHO International Conference on Radiation Protection in Medicine which concluded in 2012 with the Bonn Call for Action³ (an outcome which was very much driven by Wolfgang as Chair of the conference) or more recently, his leading role at the IRPA 15 as Chairman of the International Congress Programme Committee.⁴

Beside his international activities, he was as committed to efforts in outreach to smaller radiation protection communities. I personally invited him in 2009 to a meeting of the working group “physics and technology” of the German Society of Radiology at the Roentgen Museum in Remscheid, Germany, where he spoke passionately to an audience of 100 medical physicists about how an UN Organization influences the German Radiation Protection Legislation.⁵

And then, of course, I had the pleasure and honour of working closely with Wolfgang when he served as Chair of UNSCEAR during a difficult time in 2011/2012.⁶ His diplomatic and scientific skills were invaluable as he helmed UNSCEAR’s evaluations following the accident at the Fukushima-Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. His involvement with UNSCEAR continued until very recently when the UNSCEAR 2020 Fukushima report⁷ was launched at an online event on 9 March 2021.

Wolfgang was a real leader, taking the responsibility when needed and sharing his knowledge and insides. He was able to pass the baton for his many responsibilities on time while keeping involved and supporting wherever he could.

I will close by saying that while the scientific community and I, personally, will miss his professional and scientific expertise, I will also miss his humour, which he used to calm down the most tense of situations, his ability to lighten the most heavy and stressful circumstances and how, even after long working hours, he always had time to share photographs and stories of his grandchildren.

Wolfgang. You will be missed by many.

Emilie van Deventer

For over a decade, Wolfgang Weiss strategically supported the World Health Organization (WHO) while leading the German Federal Office of Radiation Protection (BfS) as a WHO Collaborating Centre on radiation. He contributed to WHO’s global initiative on radiation in health care, linking this important initiative with international activities such as MELODI. He played an instrumental role at the IAEA/WHO International Conference on Radiation Protection in Medicine held in Bonn in December 2012. As Conference chair, he drove the development and promotion of the Bonn Call for Action,³ a landmark blueprint for countries to enhance radiation protection in health care. His support to the WHO International Radon Project resulted in the WHO Radon Handbook,² a publication which highlighted the need for public health action to mitigate radon exposure in residential settings. Based on his experience from the Chernobyl accident, he also contributed to WHO’s response to the 2011 Fukushima disaster with wisdom and calm during the acute phase, and later with inspiration and persistence for the recognition of the long-term non-radiological health impact⁸ of radiation emergencies.

Well known to the ionizing radiation community, he also leaves behind an important legacy in non-ionizing radiation

² https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44149/9789241547673_eng.pdf..

³ <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/bonn-call-for-action>.

⁴ https://www.irpa2020.org/about/about_04.html?sMenu=abo4.

⁵ <https://www.apr.drg.de/de-DE/466/apr2009>.

⁶ https://www.unscear.org/unscear/en/about_us/bio_w-weiss.html.

⁷ <https://www.unscear.org/unscear/en/events/ffup2-launch-2021.html>.

⁸ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240015456>.

(NIR). As an astute politician, he understood the importance of research and risk communication on the topic of electromagnetic fields (EMF). He spearheaded an important national telecommunication research programme from 2002 to 2008, implementing many of WHO EMF research agendas' recommendations. Inspired by the revised International Ionizing Radiation Basic Safety Standards,⁹ Wolfgang proposed that WHO develops basic safety standards for non-ionizing radiation with other relevant UN organizations. This is work in progress thanks to a visionary, persistent and wise mentor. Most recently, as the Chair of IRPA's International Programme Committee for the IRPA 15 Congress, he scheduled a plenary session on non-ionizing radiation with a view to increase the visibility of NIR within IRPA and encourage the integration of a radiation protection culture and benchmarks of good practice in this part of the radiation spectrum.⁴

Wolfgang leaves an indelible mark on the radiation activities of WHO, from his leadership years at BfS continuing into his retirement, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to radiation protection—and ultimately to public health. Above and beyond all his professional accomplishments, we remember his kindness, his calm energy, his poise, his smile and the twinkle in his eye.

Wolfgang, you were always available for a call to advise on small and large issues. Missing you already.



Wolfgang Weiss

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

⁹ <https://www.iaea.org/publications/8930/radiation-protection-and-safety-of-radiation-sources-international-basic-safety-standards>.