

## OBITUARY

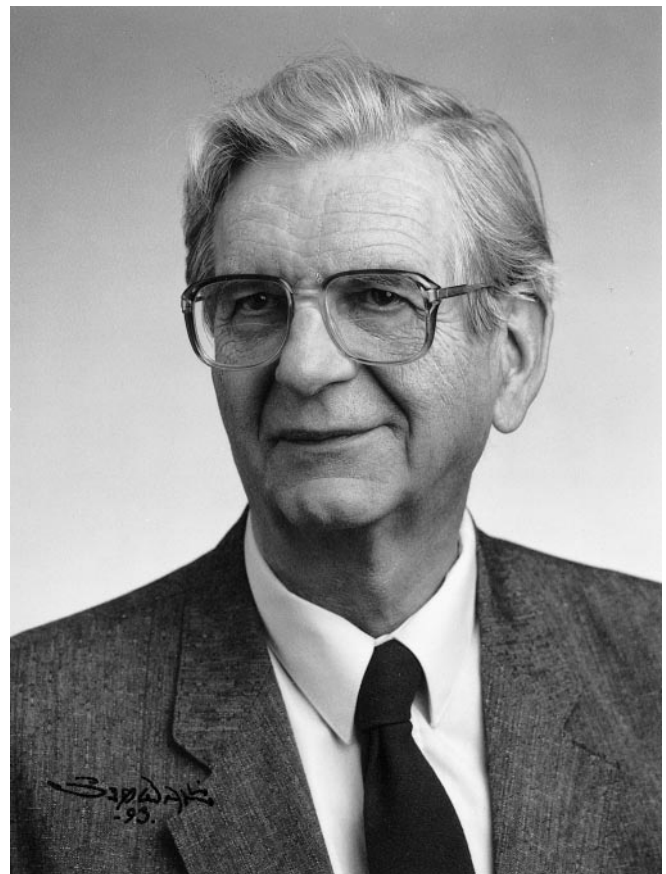
Per Brandtzaeg

**In memory of Professor Olav Hilmar Iversen**

In the middle of the Christmas celebrations we received the sad news that Professor Olav Hilmar Iversen, MD, D. Phil., had died suddenly on Christmas Day while visiting his daughter in Alta, in northern Norway. At the age of 74, Iversen was one of the last of the towering personalities in Norwegian medicine. Unaffected by his age, he retained his dynamic outlook, inexhaustible energy and untiring efficiency to the end. As head of the Institute of Pathology for 25 years, he was an enthusiastic leader and teacher, a workaholic with a sense of humour that never failed to show things in a new light. Olav Hilmar never spared himself in the cause of what he believed in. He could react emotionally, but he was also able to stop and reconsider when necessary. His perspectives ranged far beyond his own speciality, and he was involved in an extraordinary number of causes and projects. And yet he was never too busy to answer a question or lend a helping hand.

I had the privilege of working under Iversen almost uninterruptedly for a total of 18 years. It gave me a unique opportunity to benefit from his insight into pathology, teaching methods, administration and life in general. There are many of us who owe Iversen a debt of thanks, and the memory of his astounding capacity will live on. Our thoughts are with his bereaved family and especially with his beloved Ulla, who was so close to her husband both as a wife and as a colleague.

Olav Hilmar Iversen was born in Horten on 24 March 1923. He began studying theology during the war, but this was brought to an abrupt end with his arrest by the Gestapo. After his release, he joined the resistance and during the last year of the war he ran the courier service in Nordre Vestfold for the underground organization Milorg. After the war he began studying medicine in Copenhagen and later transferred to the University of Bergen, Norway, where he took his degree in 1951. He be-



came a specialist in pathology in 1962 and was awarded a doctorate in the same year for a thesis on experimental skin carcinogenesis. In 1964 he became professor of pathology at the National Hospital and also took over the Biopsy Department from Professor Leiv Kreyberg. He headed both this department and the Institute of General and Experimental Pathology until 1971, when the new pathology building was completed and the service reorganized.

Iversen was closely involved in the planning of this important new building and at the time of its inaugura-

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Translated from Norwegian by Alison Arderne Olsen

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tion he achieved the timely merger of the biopsy and necropsy sections and their associated university functions. Iversen headed the new unit, which was both a research and teaching institute and a department of pathology, until 1990. He was also an enthusiastic supporter of the administrative reorganization of the university functions and hospital laboratory services into a single unit, of which he became the head in 1972. This new organizational model set the tone in many ways for the organization of the rest of the medical faculty.

When Iversen retired from the chair of pathology in 1990, he received a grant for a 3-year senior research fellowship from the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities. He spent the time extremely productively and in December 1991 he defended a new thesis on experimental skin carcinogenesis and received his D. Phil. degree. Since 1993, as professor emeritus at the Institute of Pathology, he has published a series of contributions to cancer research, and was an active lecturer right up to the end. In the course of his career he published over 200 scientific articles, almost 50 book chapters and monographs and innumerable other articles and reviews covering a wide range of subjects, including articles and book reviews for the *Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association*.

Scientific work was one of the ways in which Iversen was able to satisfy his intense and lively curiosity and utilize the deep and wide-ranging store of knowledge he had acquired through voracious reading and a large network of contacts. He was always remarkably well informed, whatever the subject. Cell kinetics, growth regulation and the riddle of cancer were central to his research, and he was able to contribute to the cause of cancer in other ways as well as a member of the board of the Norwegian Cancer Society from 1966 to 1987, the last 3 years as chairman. He was also a member of a number of national and international committees and organizations in this and associated fields. He was one of the founders of the European Study Group for Cell Proliferation in 1966 and has been a driving force in this organization ever since. For a while his research group was one of the leaders in the field of endogenous growth inhibitors. Iversen was an innovative researcher and always had the courage to go against the tide.

Iversen had a gift for words, both written and spoken, and this was of enormous benefit to both his scientific work and his other activities. Few could capture the attention and interest of an audience as well as he, whether he was giving a lecture on some serious subject or one of his "performances". He used his gift to great effect in popularizing science and in public education. His innumerable contributions to debates on social issues in the newspapers and radio and television broadcasts on a range of topics made him widely known in Norway. He fully earned the prize for the popularization of science that he was awarded in 1985 by the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities.

Iversen's psychological insight was combined with a profound sense of humour. During his medical studies in

Copenhagen he came across the aphorisms of Piet Hein, or Kumbel, and the drawings of Robert Storm P (Petersen). He remained fascinated by the wit and wisdom of these two Danes all his life and had an extensive collection of their works. Like Kumbel, Iversen was always able to see the humour in every situation, even the most serious. He used humour to spice his teaching and as an end in itself. He was not afraid of exposing himself in an untraditional way, without a trace of academic snobbery.

Thus, Iversen was a natural choice for chairman of the committee in charge of the celebrations of the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Medical Faculty of the University of Oslo, and for many years he was also toastmaster at the annual dinner for the winners of the Jahre Prize for scientific research. He enjoyed festivities and loved to make things happen. No one who was present at the dinner at Soria Moria on 8 November 1991 will forget the resurrection of Norway's first professor of pathology, Emmanuel Fredrik Hagbarth Winge, 97 years after his death, in the person of Olav Hilmar.

Ivesen often used humour as a weapon as well. His list of publications includes 16 articles in this vein, many of which were part of his ceaseless campaign against red tape, which he called "the disease of bureaucratitis" (1977–1991). His article "The art of swimming with sharks. A study in medical sociology" was an attack on the destructive forces in the academic world, in which he pointed out how important it was not to bleed; at any sign of weakness the sharks come flocking.

Iversen's ability to express himself, combined with his far-sightedness and rich store of knowledge, made him a welcome resource in the wide range of medical and other committees he sat on. He was also frequently called on to judge doctoral theses and applications for professorships.

Iversen's contributions in the medical field were not always concerned with pathology. From 1969 to 1974 he was chairman of Statens Sykehusråd, the committee appointed to review the status of hospitals in Norway, from 1983 to 1986 he was a member of the council for research policy, and from 1984 he was a member of the board of the geomedicine fund and the committee for information and research in geomedicine of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. Geomedicine is concerned with the influence of the environment on health, and Iversen's interest in this science was part of his highly developed social conscience.

In a recent conversation I had with Olav Hilmar, he said he felt that his most important contribution to society as a whole had been the drafting of a formal definition of death in 1977. The first Norwegian act relating to transplantation, passed in 1973, contained a brief statement that the donation of organs should take place "according to existing rules". The Director General of Health, Karl Evang, therefore appointed a committee to draft regulations governing the criteria for death, which were based on detailed guidelines for establishing brain death. The work of this committee was one of the main factors that enabled Norway, in 1983, to be the first

Scandinavian country to start heart transplants. An important consideration here was that the Church of Norway had full confidence in the committee's conclusions, partly because Iversen's medical knowledge was combined with his very genuine Christian faith.

Iversen's ability to combine sound medical knowledge with faith was one of his great strengths in his untiring efforts to inform people how "death serves life", not only through organ transplants but also through necropsy, which serves as a valuable verification of medical diagnoses. He showed great integrity and courage in his approach to this sensitive subject. He also made a television series on death, whose frank, open tone made a great impression. He had difficulty in accepting negative attitudes to necropsy among physicians, and his campaign for the broad acceptance of his ideas culminated in a book, *Den medisinske undersøkelse etter døden* ("Medical examination after death", Luther Forlag, 1985), written together with the hospital priest Magne Stendal. The book expresses clearly how death can serve life and how this entails no loss of respect for either the deceased or the bereaved. His talk on the theme that "The body is transient, and only the soul is constant" was a very popular one, which he was frequently called upon to give. His view was that the body is a frail and often troublesome vessel, and that the greatness of the individual lies in his or her personality and soul. Fortunately, this talk was recorded on video in 1997 and thus preserved for posterity.

For many years the medical students at the University of Oslo were able to benefit from Iversen's inspired teaching and his remarkable faculty of association. Rarely has a professor taken his teaching duties so seriously. As a lecturer and especially as a teacher of small groups, Olav Hilmar would fascinate his listeners with his colourful presentations of pathological mechanisms spiced with good and relevant anecdotes. He gained an international reputation in student teaching as the chief editor of the Integrated Pathology Audiovisual Learning System (IPALS), which consisted of a textbook outlining in a systematic way the main principles of general pathology, plus 1000 slides illustrating 40 taped lectures. IPALS is largely based on teaching in small groups, where the students have the initiative; this approach was thus a forerunner of the problem-based learning that has now been introduced at a number of medical faculties, including Oslo. Olav Hilmar was also chairman of the European Society of Pathology's working group on the teaching of pathology in undergraduate education programs in medicine in Europe, and he wrote about 20 articles on teaching methods.

IPALS sold all over the world and was particularly useful in countries with little teaching capacity in medicine. Thus, the project fitted in with Iversen's interest in medicine in developing countries. He spent a year in Uganda as visiting professor with a salary from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, and in 1984–1990 he was an adviser to Norwegian Church Aid on a pathology laboratory in Tanzania. He also chaired a committee that reviewed the establishment of a chair in international health at the University of Oslo.

Iversen received many honours and distinctions for his scientific work and his contributions to the community. In 1987 he was made an Officer of the Order of St. Olav, in 1974 he became a member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, and in 1975 he was invited to be a member of Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina, the oldest scientific society in the world. In 1988 he was made an honorary member of the Norwegian Society of Pathology, and in 1997 of the Honorary scientific Committee of the International Institute of Anticancer Research.

Iversen's talent for organization was utilized to the fullest in recent years when he was involved in laying the foundations for a national museum of medical history. It was the last of the causes he espoused, and after his appointment as chairman of a working group in 1994, he threw himself into the task of registering suitable exhibits with his usual energy and enthusiasm.

All of us involved in pathology here at the National Hospital not only remember Iversen's medical and scientific qualifications with respect, we also remember his dynamic energy. No one who has met him will ever forget his whole-hearted commitment and unstinting devotion to getting things done, whether in the cause of science, teaching, administration or even delivering the post when the normal routines failed. His vitality and appetite for life were a source of inspiration to us all.

Iversen's long working hours and wide-ranging involvement at home and abroad are over. He was the first to acknowledge that our time on earth is limited, and his was lived with courage and optimism coupled with humour and self-irony. Life's hardships had taught him much and given him great psychological insight, and his capacity for compassion and understanding was exceptional. One of Piet Hein's verses sums up Olav Hilmar's attitude to life: he never took the easy way out, he never gave up when things were difficult, he never spared himself.