



## Juha Hernesniemi, MD, PhD (1947–2023): fly high but stay grounded!

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To the editor:

I read with deep interest, great sorrow, and heavy heart the obituary of Prof. Juha Hernesniemi by Dr. Jääskeläinen and colleagues. Prof. Juha was a legend in his own time, a pioneer and true leader who has left indelible marks in the history of neurosurgery and mentored so many young colleagues. Prof. Juha's unique academic and surgical achievements are eloquently summarized in the obituary. This letter aims to expand on his intention and motivation to mentor thousands of young neurosurgeons, whom he coached, inspired, and encouraged and who spread across the globe today to continue his legacy.

Shortly after the news of Prof. Juha's passing was revealed, numerous social media posts appeared around the globe, reflecting the gratitude and sorrow of the many young colleagues he mentored. Professor Juha was a humble man, and it was important to pass this on to his peers. While humility may not necessarily be a quality often encountered among neurosurgeons, it was all the more fascinating for a rookie to see one of the world's best declaring it a priority, important enough to teach his students while aiming for the highest standards. The obituary by Jääskeläinen et al. [1] alludes to the phrase "we will fly high," which was often followed by a personal wink and a whispering "but we will stay grounded"—just a few words and yet so substantial and comprehensive, a mere expression given with a calm voice and yet such a powerful philosophy to convey to the next generation. He flew high in his professional career, and he flew out of the norm when he chose to operate pro bono on patients who could not afford to pay. Lessons to the youngsters who are driven by monetary reward. He avoided the show and publicity but tirelessly put himself in the frontline

to protect and support the ones who asked for help and mentorship. When everyone expected the youngsters to fly, he let them slide on his wings until he taught them to take off on their own. Where did the great heart, generosity, and welcoming warmth towards youngsters come from? The answer lies in his own past. He often told the story of the young Juha, a "nobody" who would sit endlessly in the corners of cold operating theaters to observe the skills of other but would merely get noticed or acknowledged. He did not forget these memories of his own path but turned them to shape his mindset and openness towards younger colleagues he faced in the corners of the operating rooms and lecture halls when the "nobody" became somebody with global fame. A great coach and above all a wonderful man who taught so many valuable lessons to so many young neurosurgeons inside and outside the operating room.

Finally, the day has come and he has flown to the sky, where he will always remain grounded. His legacy remains in the students he trained who will pass it on to theirs to create the heritage he deserves. The end of life teaches us valuable lessons: Success is transitory, and life and fame are evanescent. True legacy renders in the progeny trained, carrying on when the master leaves. We will aim to fly high, we will stay grounded, and we will miss you!

Ajmal Zemmar is one of the many neurosurgeons who was mentored and instrumentally influenced by Juha Hernesniemi.

### Reference

1. Jääskeläinen JE, Niemelä M, von Und Zu, Fraunberg M et al (2023) Juha Hernesniemi 1947–2023 obituary. *Acta Neurochir* 165:2339–2341. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00701-023-05717-0>

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