

In memoriam of Franz Gerstenbrand (1924–2017)

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Franz Gerstenbrand was born in Hof, Moravia, on September 6, 1924, and passed away in Wien on June 30, at the age of 92 years. He was a really outstanding personality in the European and Worldwide Neurology and also a great friend of the Italian Neurology.

His biography can be easily found elsewhere; here, we want to outline, of course in a concise way, his main achievements in the neurological sciences as well as the links with the Italian Neurology and to conclude with his extraordinary human personality.

First of all, Franz Gerstenbrand was a great clinician: he loved his work of physician and neurologist, taking care of the patients, being accurate to their needs in terms of diagnosis and therapy, and also of affective closeness. He was a scrupulous observer of the various signs of a neurological disease, as well as of the ways to diagnose and to treat it. He had a great curiosity and a great skill to look at every particular sign in the patients and also to make synthesis from his observations.

He was among the first clinicians to introduce levodopa therapy in parkinsonian patients, almost at the same time of Birkmayer and Hornykiewicz. He followed step by step the evolution of the studies on Parkinson's disease and related disorders, both in diagnosis and therapy.

He described the apallic syndrome, which some decades later became the vegetative state; this scientific work, which gave him the teaching habilitation, was published as monograph in 1967, Springer-Verlag, Wien.

He was also quite receptive to emerging new fields, such as neuroimaging; in 1985, he organized with one of us (L.B.) an International Symposium on "PET and NMR: new perspectives in Neuroimaging and Clinical Neurochemistry," and the Proceedings were published by Alan R. Liss, New York.

At that time another emerging field was dementia, and again he decided to organize, with one of us (L.B.), an

International Symposium on “Aging brain and Dementia: new trends in diagnosis and therapy,” which was held in Padova, in 1988, and the Proceedings were published by Wiley-Liss, New York. Both Symposia were attended by the most outstanding researchers in these fields.

Furthermore, he was a real pioneer in the field of neurorehabilitation: he started to dedicate to it already in the 80s both in his country and also abroad; he strongly worked to create a Scientific Society for Neurorehabilitation first in Austria and later abroad. Finally, he was successful and a World Federation of Neurorehabilitation was founded in Venice in 2003 and we were with him also in this occasion.

He had always a very brilliant and curious mind and he never stopped to pay attention to new rising realities; so he pointed out the need of studying the neurological aspects, both physiological and pathological, of underwater activities as well as the space exploration's ones.

Moreover, being always a careful observer, he pointed out another field of studies, which is the ethical implications in neurological diagnosis and therapy, founding the specialty of Neuroethics.

Furthermore, he promoted specific research groups of the Scientific Societies, and especially of the WFN, for all these new approaches.

Franz Gerstenbrand was also a formidable organizer of events, having a unique intelligence to understand both human beings and environmental situations. In 1962, he founded the Danube International Neurological Group, which later became a Society. This was an extraordinary idea, since at the time of the cold war era, Austria, a country with the flag of neutrality, could offer the site for a meeting of neuroscientists coming from western and eastern countries, giving the opportunity of a dialog and an exchange of ideas among people in the name of science.

He also had in mind to unify the European neurology: so, in 1989, in Prague, together with Daniel, Bartko, and Alessandro Agnoli, he founded the Pan European Society of Neurology, which in 1991, in Wien, was transformed in the European Federation of Neurological Societies, of which he became the first President and the Secretariat was kept in Wien. Later, he worked to further unify the various European societies and he reached this goal in 2014 when the European Academy of Neurology was founded.

At last, we should mention also the field of clinical neuropharmacology for which he was promoting, again with Alessandro Agnoli, a European Association already in 1983, which was changed into a Society in 1994; of course, he was the main promoter and the first President.

The human personality of Franz Gerstenbrand was extremely rich; he was a truly enthusiast of life and was always applying such enthusiasm all along his life in its various moments; he was a very good air pilot, he was an underwater explorer, he played violin, he was a great lover of music, and certainly Wien was a marvelous site for it, he loved nature and animals, particularly his elephant, almost a son for him, which he was awarded by the Myanmar Community; he loved to be together with familiars and friends, tasting good food and drinking good wines, and this happened hundreds of time in Italy; he was always loyal and sincere and never tolerated unreliable people. He had a really warm and sincere affect and everyone, in harmony with him, was immediately captured by him.

All the Italian neurologists are grateful to Franz Gerstenbrand for his science, his teaching, and his humanity: we will keep him in our minds and our hearts and we are deeply close to Gudrun and the whole family in his memory.