

Isabelle Rapin (1927–2017)

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On May 24, 2017 Dr. Isabelle Rapin, gifted and devoted clinician, researcher and teacher and luminary in the field of autism and communication disorders, passed away after a brief illness with pneumonia

Dr. Rapin was professor in the Saul R. Korey Department of Neurology and in pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. She had a singularity of purpose, from the time she was ten, when she determined that she would be a doctor. She attended the University of Lausanne Medical School and entered, what she called, “the then non-existent profession of child neurology” (Rapin 2015). Dr. Rapin came to Einstein in 1958 following an internship in pediatrics at Bellevue Hospital in New York city and a neurology residency and child neurology fellowship at the Neurological Institute at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital.

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She obtained her first research grant from the National Institutes of Health in 1959. Thus began a prolific career throughout which she authored hundreds of scholarly papers, and book chapters, one book, and she was co-editor of ten books on child neurology, including two volumes on Child Neuropsychology for the Handbook of Neuropsychology. Although much of her research and writing concerned autism and communication disorders, she also studied hearing, vision, and motor systems and the relationship of sensory stimulation to the development of higher cortical function. She contributed significantly to advances in basic neuroscience in inherited disorders of metabolism. After she retired in 2012 at the age of 84 she continued to write and interact with colleagues, who often sought her out for her insights and advice. The journal *Neurology* published *The autism “epidemic”: Ethical, legal, and social issues in a developmental spectrum disorder* (Graf et al. 2017) one month before she died, and true to form she had at least one other paper in progress

Her remarkable accomplishments have had a profound impact, yet they do not describe the totality of her legacy. So much of what Dr. Rapin had to teach, she taught by example. She was distinguished by her great passion for knowledge. I believe this to be the foundation of her strong work ethic, her desire and exquisite ability to listen and communicate in a clear and direct fashion, and her utter delight in new discoveries and in the accomplishments of her students. She said, “When I learn something new that excites me, I want to share it with others and get them excited, too.” She was perpetually a student as well as the teacher. She was open minded to every person and every perspective.

I met Dr. Rapin in 1985 in San Diego at the International Neuropsychology Society Conference. I was a neuropsychology intern presenting my first poster. She was looking

for a research assistant for her program project, *Nosology: Higher Cerebral Function Disorders in Children*, recently funded by the NIH. A group of us, including Dr. Rapin and her husband Dr. Harold Oaklander went to the San Diego Zoo together. I recall the picture I took of the group standing in front of the flamingos, all on one foot. The willingness of this formidable clinician and scholar to join in the silliness and be a flamingo, instantly made her accessible and increased my admiration. A month later she hired me. At that moment I did not realize exactly how very fortunate I was. Just by watching her work I learned volumes about how to interact with and assess patients and think about research. Her never ending curiosity and enthusiasm for learning and teaching were a great inspiration, as was the impact of this wisdom on thousands of families.

Isabelle was a revered mentor to generations of residents, students and colleagues. She was exceedingly generous and collaborative, in that she freely gave of her time to discuss ideas and provide feedback on drafts of papers, talks, and grant proposals, to advance the cause of progress in medicine. She challenged her students to think clearly but encouraged each to develop his or her own perspective and contribution. She celebrated every success of her students. She actively promoted the careers of colleagues. She held herself to the highest ethical standards and expected no less from us. Her colleagues and trainees in autism showed their appreciation by giving her the Lifetime Achievement Award at the International Meeting for Autism Research in 2008.

Isabelle was a strong and knowledgeable advocate for her patients. Her daughter Dr. Anne Louise Oaklander, a respected neurologist in her own right, once said of her mother, “She’s a really outstanding clinician, because she knows how to listen to the patient.” (Shaw 2004). Isabelle provided compassionate care where every patient and family member was heard and considered. In my first weeks at Einstein I accompanied Isabelle to clinic in Jacobi Hospital and witnessed the face of a bewildered intern as Isabelle told her that her patient was not a male. He certainly was. Isabelle, not quick to resolve the student’s confusion, finally gently said, “not a male. He’s a little boy”. Language

influences cognition. Patients are people. She was a stickler about this. Isabelle cared for her patients’ families too, helping them negotiate the maze of services and treatments available by providing them the needed information to make informed decisions, clearly differentiating what made sense based on empirical evidence from what did not.

A true clinician-researcher, Isabelle emphasized the importance of research driven by clinical observation. Hers was not an ivory tower mentality. She often said, “Patients are our teachers”. Isabelle’s research was largely devoted to studying autism and communication disorders at the distinct descriptive levels of behavior, etiology, and pathophysiology, with an eye towards creating a “hybrid nosology that maps biology onto behavior” (Rapin 2014).

Isabelle lived a wonderful life and she will continue to teach us through her publications and example. I, along with so many others, am blessed to have called her mentor and friend. Despite her fame, Isabelle was really not one for the spotlight. She put that spotlight on the work and on the students and colleagues whose work she felt needed to be seen. Upon hearing of her passing Ami Klin wrote to me, “In characteristic fashion, she would probably ask us not to make a fuss. But for once we wouldn’t heed her advice. Because a giant has moved on.” She will be sorely missed.

Isabelle is survived by her beloved husband, Harold, their children Anne Louise, Christine, Stephen and Peter, their spouses and four grandchildren.

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