

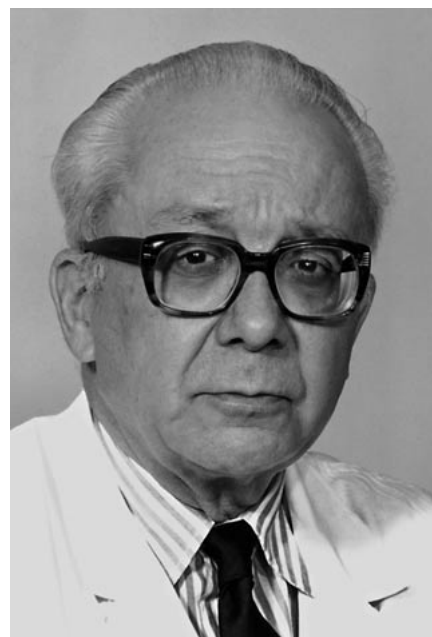
## **Andrea Prader 1919–2001**

On June 3, 2001, Professor Andrea Prader passed away at the age of 81 years, after an extremely successful, rich, and busy life. He was born on December 23, 1919, in Samedan, in the Grisons, Switzerland, where people hardly talk a lot, but are trustworthy and reliable, learning from the raw nature and harsh mountains.

After the Matura (baccalaureat) in 1938, Andrea Prader started studying medicine in Lausanne and Zurich, and finished medical school in 1945 although he was called to duty at the Swiss Army cavalry during the World War II. After postgraduate training in anatomy (with Töndury in Zurich) and internal medicine (with Vanotti in Lausanne, whose work on the porphyrias stimulated his interest in inborn errors of metabolism) he decided to specialize in pediatrics.

He married Silvia Schucany in 1946, his intellectual equal and partner for almost 5 decades. They had 3 children, two sons and a daughter. In 1947, he started his career, and became an assistant to the famous Professor Guido Fanconi at the Kinderspital in Zurich. His career was straightforward, and only interrupted by a visit to the United States where he met Lawson Wilkins, one of the 'fathers' of pediatric endocrinology. This was the foundation of his lifelong interest in and love of our subspecialty. In New York, he was made a fellow at Bellevue Hospital with Emmet Holt. In 1951, he became Oberarzt (equivalent to chief resident), in 1957 Privatdozent (assistant professor), and, in 1962, he succeeded Fanconi as Chairman of the Department, a position he held until he retired in 1986.

After his beloved wife passed away in 1995, his intellectual interest started to fade, and it seemed, as if – through this sad loss – he had also lost the zest and curiosity for science so characteristic of him during all the years before.



Andrea Prader (1919–2001).

It is not possible to enumerate all his scientific achievements, and only a few highlights can be mentioned. After studies which lead to the discovery of hereditary fructose intolerance (with Froesch and Labhart), hypocalcemic pseudo-vitamin D deficiency as a genetic type of rickets (with Illig), as well as the description of what is now called the Prader-Labhart-Willi syndrome, his main interest turned to the disorders of the adrenal cortex. In this area, he was the first to describe lipid adrenal hyperplasia (with Siebenmann). Later, his seminal work led to our discovery of the 17,20-lyase deficiency. With his collabora-

tors, he also presented unusual case reports of general physiological interest. An example is virilization of a female fetus by an adrenal tumor of the mother (with Mürset). He was very helpful and supportive in establishing modern laboratories such as the protein hormone (where radioimmunoassays were refined), and the steroid laboratory (where gas chromatography and mass spectrometry were put to practical use). Later, he facilitated and introduced additional diagnostic methods such as screening for hypothyroidism and congenital adrenal hyperplasia (with Illig and Torresani) to the existing programs.

A second pillar of his interest and scientific work was the modern analysis of growth and puberty. He and his colleague and friend Tanner in London were among the first to introduce mathematical accuracy to the analysis of growth. Prader initiated and conducted the Zurich longitudinal growth study, and his work was and still is continued by Largo and co-workers, as well as the mathematicians Molinari and Gasser. Many new insights into the mechanisms of growth and puberty were discovered by means of this meticulous work over decades. He also was one of the first to use human growth hormone in patients with pituitary insufficiency.

Although at heart a pediatric endocrinologist, he acquired vast knowledge in all areas of pediatrics. In the sixties and seventies, at a time when pediatrics threatened to disintegrate into several subspecialties, he led his group with great insight and thus showed how the subspecialties could be integrated and how the overview in pediatrics could be maintained. While many of the new specialists tended to overestimate the importance of their own field, he was the one to show the right proportions to his students and residents. It was not unusual for him to make a diagnosis which had been overlooked by the specialist concerned. Nobody knew how he ran our large hospital and still managed to stay abreast of practically all aspects relating to pediatrics. But he did, and the children, our patients, benefited from his attention to the 'whole child'. Although he abhorred idle 'psychological' talk, and believed only in what was clear, logical, and reasonable, he understood the importance of true psychology and compassion. He never mentioned much about this to us, but we got the message when we experienced him at the bedside of a severely ill child, and noticed how his low-keyed manners and soft voice had a soothing and reassuring effect.

Because he was an excellent, clear and brilliant lecturer guided by reason and logic, and not by vanity, he was invited to many meetings around the globe. His lectures

always made their point clearly, and – unlike many others – there was always a clear and useful 'message' to take home. This was because he never lectured to boost his ego, but out of sheer interest in the topic. In this way, Prader became internationally famous. He was elected to be a member of the British Royal College of Paediatrics, the German Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina, and many other societies. He received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Tokushima, Frankfurt, Lyon, and Zaragossa (where his former pupil Ferrandez established the Andrea Prader center for the study of growth), and important prizes such as the Otto Nägeli prize (one of the highest honors in Swiss science, rarely given to clinicians), and the Heubner medal in Germany. Of course, he also was president and later honorary member of the Swiss Pediatric Society. Although he valued them, he did not attribute much importance to these honors, and did not make them public. When he returned from a trip, he would quite often not even mention to us that he had received a honorary degree or some other distinction. We usually had to find out from our colleagues abroad!

Because he felt that pediatric endocrinology was not being given the attention it deserved at other meetings such as the *Acta Endocrinologica* congresses, he suggested that the pediatric colleagues meet separately to discuss their specific problems. This is how ESPE, the European Society for Paediatric Endocrinology, was founded at his initiative. The year 2002 marks the 40th anniversary of this very successful society: what started as an informal meeting with 15 to 20 friends has now turned into an event that drew about 2,000 participants together at the last meeting in Montreal (together with the American Lawson Wilkins society). The Andrea Prader Prize is given annually to a deserving ESPE member in recognition of leadership and accomplishment in pediatric endocrinology – and it is one way of keeping his memory alive.

Towards the end of this brief and incomplete summary of his achievements may I be allowed to make a few personal comments. To those who knew him only superficially, Andrea Prader may sometimes have given the impression of a somewhat dry, even unfriendly person. Some young colleagues would complain that he did not even greet or recognize them when he rushed through the corridors – this was mainly due to the fact that he was myopic and often mentally preoccupied with important matters. What really impressed me most about him were not his honorary degrees and prizes but the fact that he was always objective and fair, and that he never made promises he could not keep. If the youngest student would ask a sensible question he would take his time to listen and

respond carefully. If, on the other hand, some ‘very important’ person would say something which did not make sense, he would get up and leave, not wanting to waste his time. I have never met another person like him, one who could never be bluffed by anyone. What impressed him, however, was sharpness of mind and discipline in thinking. In this sense, he was a true Cartesian. ‘Cogito ergo sum’ could have been his invention. This is what made him a truly modern chairman.

Another important facet of Andrea Prader was his love of art. He had an open mind and modern taste, which came as a surprise to many. He admired the work of the expressionist Emil Nolde more than that of other painters, for instance. It was Nolde who wrote: ‘The paintings and sculptures are but a mere reflection of the inner spirit. How can we ever come close?’. Prader did come close, although he did not talk much about it. But this is how people from the Grison mountains are: if they don’t show much of their ‘inner spirit’ to strangers, it does not mean

that it is not there. It was thus a privilege for some of us, over the years, to gradually change from young, respectful, and sometimes even apprehensive collaborators, to being considered his friend. We could then clearly experience his humanity, compassion, fine sense of humor and irony, and we realized that what seemed to be dry from the outside was just discipline and – yes – the true modesty that characterized this famous and often honored man.

All of us who knew him more than superficially, and had the privilege of learning from and working with him, will be grateful for what he gave us, not only as our teacher in pediatrics and endocrinology, but also as an example of continuity, trustworthiness, and austerity and inner richness at the same time.

Farewell, you tireless wanderer through the beautiful gardens of medicine, science, and art. Andrea Prader, we will never forget you!

*Milo Zachmann, Zurich*