

Helmut Beckmann (1940–2006)

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With the untimely death of Helmut Beckmann at the age of 66 (22.5.1940–3.9.2006), the psychiatric community has lost one of the founders of biologically based psychiatry in Germany.

Helmut Beckmann's major scientific interests were psychopharmacology, neuropathology of endogenous psychoses, and differentiated psychopathology in the tradition of C. Wernicke, K. Kleist and K. Leonhard. After the study of medicine in Cologne, Düsseldorf, Heidelberg and Munich, he trained in psychiatry at the Psychiatric District Hospital of Haar/Munich and moved to the Department of Psychiatry, University of Munich, as research assistant in 1971. Under the aegis of H. Hippus and N. Matussek, he was involved in clinical and biochemical studies in the emerging field of psychopharmacology, including a research fellowship at F.K. Goodwin's group at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Bethesda, Md., USA. In 1978 he received an appointment as university lecturer in 'Clinical Psychiatry' at the University of Munich ['Habilitation']. In the same year he moved to the Central Institute of Mental Health, Mannheim (Head: H. Häfner), where he was appointed Professor at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Heidelberg in 1978 and Vice-Director in 1983. Two years later, in 1985, he became head of the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the University of Würzburg, a position he held until his retirement in May, 2006.

In 1979, Helmut Beckmann was a Constitutional Committee Member of the German Society of Biological Psychiatry, became President in 1987–1990, and was an Honorary Fellow from 2000. He served as treasurer of the World Federation of Societies of Biological Psychiatry (WFSBP) from 1991 to 1997, and as President of the Col-

legium Internationale Neuro-Psychopharmacologicum (CINP) from 1998 to 2000. In 1989, he was co-founder of the International Wernicke-Kleist-Leonhard Society (WKL), appointed as president and confirmed in this position until his death. Helmut Beckmann's publications include more than 350 papers, books and new editions of Leonhard's textbooks. He was appointed 'Doctor honoris causa' by the Universidad Nacional de Asunción, Paraguay, and received the Kurt Schneider Prize for his twin studies together with E. Franzek. He served on the Editorial Board of many psychiatric journals, including *Psychopathology*, *Journal of Neural Transmission*, *Biological Psychiatry*, and *World Journal of Biological Psychiatry*. Helmut Beckmann trained a generation of psychiatrists in evidence-based treatment and psychopathology, and thus promoted a generation of academics, many of whom are leaders in the field today.

When I first met Helmut Beckmann together with K. Leonhard visiting the Psychiatric District Hospital in Lohr, Germany, I experienced two brilliant psychiatrists, strenuously and enthusiastically exploring patients and discussing each patient's diagnosis within the framework of differentiated psychopathology. Helmut Beckmann became acquainted with K. Leonhard's work through his doctoral advisor H. Dietrich, Munich, very early in his professional career. Early in his academic career he thus came to the conclusion that one of the reasons for the lack of progress in psychiatric research could be – although worked out with good intention – the anological diagnostic methodology carried out through expert consensus. On his appointment to Würzburg he invited K. Leonhard for lectures and visited him several times in the former Eastern part of Germany absorbing his out-

standing knowledge on endogenous psychoses. Inspired by him he contrasted the nosological approach with a classification of the endogenous psychoses based on a clinical-empirical approach derived from lifelong observations of the patients in highly differentiated descriptions. He insisted that a certain diagnosis can be provided only when all the characteristic symptoms of a clinical picture are clearly present. Helmut Beckmann proposed to go back on the painstaking road of psychopathological differentiation in order to obtain the most homogeneous groups for investigation, thus enabling sophisticated modern biomedical techniques to bring more certainty to the field.

In a series of reports he and his co-workers pinpointed the nosological autonomy of cycloid psychoses, unsystematic and systematic schizophrenias by inter-rater reliability analysis and long-term follow-up studies. He emphasized that the phenomenon of birth seasonality is confined to an excess of winter and spring births in cycloid psychoses and systematic schizophrenias (both groups with low familial loading of psychosis). Subsequent studies on maternal recall of gestational infections documented a direct relationship between flu-like and febrile affections in the first trimester of maternal gestation with the later occurrence of cycloid psychoses and second trimester affections with manifestations of systematic schizophrenias. The autonomy of the cycloid psychoses was substantiated by neurophysiological and morphometric studies. In a systematic twin study he provided evidence that in cycloid psychosis monozygotic pairs had similar concordance rates to dizygotic pairs, pointing to a low heritability. These findings were confirmed by a controlled family study, where first-degree relatives of patients with cycloid psychoses were found to show a similar low frequency of secondary cases to relatives of a population-based control sample.

Driven by his pioneering neuropathological findings of early prenatal cytoarchitectural malformations in the brains of patients with schizophrenic psychoses, he is one of the fathers of the neurodevelopmental theory of these psychoses. In 1986 with C. Jakob he reported on cortical and subcortical developmental disturbances in schizophrenic psychoses, particularly in the entorhinal area. These cytoarchitectural abnormalities were mainly or exclusively localized in the upper cortical layers of the limbic allocortex, including circumscribed malformations, nerve cell alterations as well as cytoarchitectural deviations attributable to disruptions of neural migration in the second trimester of gestation.

Clinically, his major affinity was to the psychomotor psychoses. His examinations were based on the profound knowledge of his predecessors, and he taught us to meticulously observe the clinical pictures. This resulted in a profound progress towards an etiological differentiation of the catatonic psychoses, which finally demonstrated a confirmed and significant linkage of periodic catatonia to chromosome 15q15, despite considerable genetic heterogeneity. In the light of these findings the spectrum of psychoses with schizophrenic and schizophrenia-like symptoms did not appear to be a continuum of disorders, but seemed rather to consist of different, clinically sharply distinguished subgroups with different genetic, somatic and psychosocial origins.

Although his findings were not readily accepted, he always hoped that reservations about a nosological differentiation of endogenous psychoses would one day give way to a fruitful discussion of its findings and implications. In Helmut Beckmann the psychiatric community loses a person who translated brilliant ideas into practical research to advance scientific and clinical knowledge on the etiology of mental disorders and treatment of patients with mental disorders.

Selected Bibliography

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