



Josef Assheuer

1941-2020

Dr. Josef Assheuer was born in Neheim – Hüsten, Germany on December 9, 1941 and had three siblings. He attended primary school in Sundern and secondary school in Neheim – Hüsten. At an early age, Josef became fond of the medical profession. That passion led him to pursue a medical degree at the University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany. Throughout that period, he also spent one year at the School of Medicine in Bordeaux, France to broaden his perspectives and clinical acuity. Following the completion of his medical school studies, he completed an internship at the St. André Hospital in Bordeaux before returning to Germany to pursue specialized training in Nuclear Medicine at the University of Bonn.

The 1980s witnessed the rise of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Enthusiastic about the clinical and research possibilities of MRI, Josef adopted the technology early-on, founded an institute for Nuclear Medicine in Germany, and quickly became the leading authority and referral center of such imaging in all of Germany and the region. In fact, he struggled tirelessly to overcome the technical problems of early generation MRI machines, always seeking to enhance the technological prowess of such imaging and developed new insights for the field to assist in patient management and research interests.

Enthusiastic about using MRI for scientific studies, Josef developed a special interest in the vertebral endplate. In fact, as early as 1986-87 Josef was the first, to our knowledge, to describe MRI “vertebral bone marrow modifications” related to degenerative disc lesions, later to become known the world over as “Modic changes.” His observations and studies were published in the mid-1980s, but did not receive the proper recognition they deserved. Nonetheless, being the humble man that he was, Josef never complained or appeared unsettled due to this oversight.

Josef further saw the immense applications of imaging for the use of experimental studies in animals. In line with such research interests, he became acquainted with veterinarian Professor Martin Sager, which led to a 32-year-long collaboration. Josef created a CT/MRI Atlas of the Dog, which was the first of its kind worldwide and became widely used. The collaboration led to numerous important discoveries, leading him to become one of the early radiologists of his time to become a presence and speaker at various veterinary meetings and related courses. Professor Sager has fond sentiments of Josef, remarking that “Josef was a motivating academic teacher who strived always for perfection and scientific exactness.”

Without question, Josef maintained a never-ending interest in spinal imaging studies for the decades that followed, becoming involved with many societies and organizations along the way. In 1992, he became an active member of the International Society for the Study of the Lumbar Spine (ISSLS). In recent years, he developed an interest in spinal phenotyping and Co-Chaired the ISSLS Degenerative Spinal Phenotypes Focus Group along with Michele Battié and Dino Samartzis.

He was an intelligent, cultured, easy-going friend and colleague with an amazing sense of humor. Moreover, he was fluent in several languages. For all these reasons, he was instrumental in facilitating relations between different members of ISSLS. Despite his personal struggles since 2017 with the disease that led to his passing, he attended the 2019 ISSLS meeting in Kyoto, Japan and was an active participant.

Josef was indeed a Renaissance man. Besides being multilingual, he had a profound interest and knowledge of literature and history of languages, was a passionate sailor, and took part in regattas with his beloved Trias Class boat until the very last years. Among his most beloved of accomplishments, Josef was the father of two daughters and grandfather of two girls.

Among his friends at ISSLS, Josef will always be remembered as a gentle spirit with an unmatched pleasant disposition and zest for life, who was very approachable, modest, passionate about spine imaging, and eager to share his vast knowledge and perspectives with others. Josef will be forever missed and his memory will live on in all he touched.

Federico Balagué
Michele Battié
Dino Samartzis
Dietrich Schlenzka

References

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