

# Alexandre Minkowski

1915–2004

We were sorry to learn of the recent death of a pioneer in Neonatology in Europe, Prof. Alexandre Minkowski, who was also the first Editor-in-Chief of *Biology of the Neonate*. Prof. Jean-Pierre Relier, second Editor-in-Chief of *Biology of the Neonate*, has written this tribute to Prof. Minkowski.

H.L. Halliday, Belfast  
C.P. Speer, Würzburg

Alexandre Minkowski, born on December 5, 1915, has now left us after a long illness borne at the hospital Les Invalides among the soldiers that he esteemed in his own fashion. He was born at the height of the 'Great War' at a time when Europe only existed in a purely geographic sense. In his own particular way he came to know and traveled through the fascinating 20th century. He was the son of two remarkable psychiatrists, Eugène and Françoise, and inherited their qualities, however without choosing to follow them in their discipline. Nonetheless he was an extraordinary person: fascinating by his intelligence, disconcerting when in a fit of anger, attractive by his intuition, engaging by his commitment – in short, by his own style of genius.

After living through the difficult Second World War, Minkowski was awarded a Rockefeller fellowship and left for Chicago in 1947 to study neonatology with the then masters of the period, Julius Hesse and Sam Levine. Unfortunately it is not possible to cite here all the great names of this period from whom his genius enabled him to glean his knowledge and the institutions he frequented. He became a friend of those in the Western world who were later to create the discipline of neonatology. On his return from the USA in 1950, he took charge of the newborns at the Baudelocque Hospital in Paris. Later in 1957, he organized around himself a 'harem' directed by the three authorities which made its renown: Suzanne Sainte Anne Dargassies, neurologist and pupil of André Thomas; Jeanne Claudie Larroche, an indefatigable pathologist and pupil of Paul Yakovlev at Harvard, and Colette Dreyfus-Brisac who described the characteristics of the EEG in the newborn and premature infant. Thus she importantly complemented the fundamental knowledge contributed by Sainte Anne Dargassies in the clinical setting and that of Jeanne Claudie Larroche in the pathology laboratory.

It was also at this period in 1957 that he founded a journal of neonatology entitled 'Etudes Néonatales' later to become 'Biologia Neonatorum' in 1959, published by Karger in

Basel, and to which all the great names of neonatology contributed. Initially published in French and English, this journal evolved into *Biology of the Neonate*, and from 1962 onwards has been published in English only.

Alexandre Minkowski was indefatigable, he had a wandering spirit and he traveled the whole world from east to west to the north, but not much to the south. When by chance I met him in September 1963, it was not my title of 'Intern of the Paris hospitals' which attracted him, but the fact that I was newly arrived from the United States and more particularly from the University of California at Los Angeles. From that time onwards our destinies were inseparable – I first became his pupil, then his successor, and above all his friend. Nonetheless he was at odds with the greater part of the university world. It was true that he was somewhat of a despot, but for me he was someone who accepted nothing a priori. He ceaselessly questioned knowledge acquired, and most of all that concerning the mother and child. As with so many others, he instilled in me the inclination for and interest in the process of childbirth, and he worked all his life to improve the conditions of this process. Perhaps on account of having had an education that was too 'Cartesian', there were certain notions of life during pregnancy that he did not accept. He had the intelligence to listen to all who spoke on this subject, always questioning the positive points as well as the negative ones.

But Alex was not only simply a neonatologist, for his exceptional memory allowed him to undertake whatever subject took his interest, above all music which he particularly loved. Enamored of literature, he became an author: 'The Barefoot Mandarin' was an autobiography describing him as he had always been. He never left anyone feeling indifferent to him.

For now, my dear Alex, in the name of all those who have the responsibility of care of the mother and child, allow me to say to you, 'Merci'.

Jean-Pierre Relier, Paris