

Georg Rajka

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KRISTIAN THESTRUP-PEDERSEN

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Our colleague, Georg Rajka, is no longer among us, but he is certainly with us. We all know his name, and if we dermatologists had a Hall of Fame (like those in which our American friends put film and rock stars), he would be there.

A short biography

Georg Rajka was born on 10 March 1925 in Budapest, Hungary. He gained his medical degree at the University of Budapest in 1949. After the 1956 uprising he fled to Sweden, where he worked as a young doctor at Karolinska from 1957, completing his thesis on atopic eczema in 1963. He subsequently spent a short time in Umeå. In 1971 he was appointed Professor at Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway, a position he held until 1995. He was also appointed Visiting Professor at the Mayo Clinic and University of California, San Francisco, in 1975. He was an honorary member of many dermatological societies. In 1979 he initiated the Symposia on Atopic Dermatitis, which continue today.

In 1959 Georg married Susanne. They have two sons, Thomas Erik and Anders Georg (born in 1963 and 1965). After his retirement in 1995, Georg continued to enjoy life in Oslo in the summer, and in Nice in the winter. Sadly, he suffered from illness during the last 6 months; however, he celebrated his 88th birthday this year with his family and friends, and passed away in his sleep, as he did not wish to have further medical treatment.

What made Georg Rajka famous?

What is Georg's background for entering the Hall of Fame of Dermatology? The answers are simple:

He was the first to define atopic dermatitis in detail. In 1892 Professor Besnier in Paris gave his name to Besnier's prurigo, based on a case report of 3 teenage boys with this disorder (Ann Derm et de Syphilographie 1882; p. 634). Poul Nexmand wrote a forgotten thesis on Besnier's prurigo in 1948, based on 100 adults with this disease.

But in 1980 together with Jon Hanifin, he "defined" atopic dermatitis with its 4 main criteria and 35 minor criteria (Hanifin JM, Rajka G. Diagnostic features of atopic dermatitis. Acta Derm Venereol Suppl 1980; 92: 44–47). It is noteworthy that immunoglobulin E (IgE) was not among the main criteria.

We still use the Hanifin–Rajka definition for atopic dermatitis, although there is now also a simplified British definition, which omits the clinical details of atopic dermatitis that are set out in the Hanifin–Rajka definition (Williams HC, Burney PG, Hay RJ, Archer CB, Shipley MJ, Hunter J, et al. The UK working party's diagnostic criteria for atopic dermatitis. I. Derivation of a minimum set of discriminators for atopic dermatitis. Br J Dermatol 1994; 131: 383–396).

The definition of atopic dermatitis, started by Georg Rajka, led to a focus on this widespread disease. Other "definitions" have been introduced subsequently: the simplified British definition, which works well in epidemiological studies; the millennium definition (Bos JD, van Leent EJ, Sillevius Smitt JH. The millennium criteria for the diagnosis of atopic dermatitis.

Exp Dermatol 1998; 7: 132–138); and the extrinsic vs intrinsic definition (Bieber T. Atopic dermatitis. N Engl J Med 2008; 358: 1482), where focus is on IgE and the existence of type I allergies, but do not include the detailed clinical symptoms of the disease. The Hanifin–Rajka definition omits only that atopic eczema is not just eczema developing in the scalp and face and “drifting” towards the toes, but that it can be nummular or papulous without scalp and face involvement.

Georg Rajka was a clinician and a researcher. He had an interest in “allergy” as an important factor in the initiation of the disease, as did many before him. The discovery of IgE in 1969 further supported the theory of involvement of allergy in atopic diseases. Allergy is certainly important for allergic rhinitis, and partially for asthma, but is probably an epiphenomenon in atopic dermatitis, the real cause of which lies in a genetic defect in the epidermis that results in a skewed development of the immune system early in life. Allergy may contribute to worsening of eczema, but it is not the primary cause.

Secondly, Georg Rajka initiated the Symposia on Atopic Dermatitis, which began in Oslo in 1979. The meetings had a small audience of colleagues from all over the world, and were intellectually and socially stimulating, often being held in surroundings of great geographical beauty in Norway. After the first five symposia, he invited me to continue them, and so I did in 1995 in Aarhus, Denmark. As atopic dermatitis is a global condition, we have held symposia in Davos, Rome, Portland, Arachon, Kyoto, Munich and Moshi (Tanzania). The 8th Georg Rajka Symposium will be held in Nottingham, UK,



Fig. 1. Georg and Susanne Rajka were honorary participants at the symposium in 2009.

in 2014 (www.isad.org). Georg Rajka continued to actively participate in the symposia until 2009.

One of Georg Rajka’s most important achievements is putting Nordic and Norwegian dermatology on the global map. His enduring contribution to this field is clearly seen today in Norwegian dermatology (Petter Gjersvik, Forum for Nordic Dermato-Venereology 2009; 14: 1, www.medicaljournals.se/forum).

We are grateful to Georg Rajka for his important and lasting impact on our specialty. Through his work many young dermatologists, biologists and others are maintaining a focus on atopic dermatitis. It is hoped that the future will bring new therapeutic options for those suffering from the severe forms of this disorder, in which 10–25% of patients carry the disease into adulthood.

Susanne Rajka and their children carry the burden of our loss.