

In memoriam



Photo at the office by Erkki Hämmänen 2008

Yrjö Tapio Konttinen 1952–2014

Yrjö Tapio Konttinen, Swedish Professor of Medicine at the University of Helsinki and Chief Physician of Internal Medicine at Helsinki University Central Hospital, died unexpectedly on the 10th of December 2014 at the age of 62. Professor Konttinen will be remembered as an exceptionally productive and highly cited scientist in the fields of musculoskeletal and rheumatic diseases, as well as an inspirational mentor and teacher to a generation of medical doctors and scientists.

Yrjö T. Konttinen was born on September 28th 1952 in Helsinki. He received his M.D. degree from the University of Helsinki and the University of Uppsala in 1977, and was board certified in internal medicine and rheumatology from the University of Helsinki. He began his scientific career early, during medical school, and defended his Ph.D. thesis dealing with the immunology of rheumatic diseases in 1981. His supervisor and mentor at the time was Professor Otto Wegelius.

From 1982 to 1984 Yrjö T. Konttinen worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, San Diego, under the supervision of Professors Nathan J. Zvaifler and Harry G. Bluestein. From 1989 to 1991 he did a second postdoctoral fellowship at the University of New York with Professor Robert J. Winchester.

Yrjö T. Konttinen was granted the title of Adjunct Professor in Experimental Internal Medicine in 1986 and the title of Adjunct Professor in Internal Medicine in 1989, both at the University of Helsinki. From 1999 to 2003 he worked as Professor of Oral Medicine and Chief Physician at the Institute of Dentistry, and from 2003 until his death as the Swedish Professor of Medicine and Chief Physician of Internal Medicine at the University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Central Hospital.

Professor Konttinen served as research director, and later as a scientific advisor, of the Invalid Foundation's Orthopaedic Hospital, Orton; as a scientific advisor for Coxa Hospital for Joint Replacement; from 2001 to 2003 as President of the Finnish Society for Rheumatology; and from 2007 as Vice-director of the National Doctoral Program of Musculoskeletal Disorders and Biomaterials.

Yrjö T. Konttinen was an enthusiastic and creative scientist who never grew tired of “reading stories from the golden book of nature”, wording that he often used to describe the process of scientific discovery. Together with his dear friend and colleague, the late Seppo Santavirta, Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at the University of Helsinki, Yrjö T. Kont-

ntinen founded the Musculoskeletal Diseases and Inflammation Research Group that achieved status of Center of Excellence at the Academy of Finland in 1999. Over the years, this highly international and interdisciplinary research laboratory accommodated a large number of scientists and students of varied backgrounds including medical doctors, biochemists, dentists, pharmacologists, engineers, and veterinarians of 32 different nationalities.

Yrjö T. Konttinen's scientific works encompass over 700 papers published in peer-reviewed journals and 45 supervised doctoral dissertations. These reports, that have now been cited nearly 20,000 times, cover a wide range of biomedical sciences ranging from the basic mechanisms of various rheumatic diseases and inflammation to biomaterial science, tissue-implant interaction, mechanisms of the foreign body reaction, epidemiology, and oral medicine. The wide spectrum of these disciplines reflects Yrjö T. Konttinen's desire to continuously learn and to integrate knowledge from various fields of biomedicine and biomaterial science in new and innovative ways. In the year 2000 Professor Konttinen received the Otto Wegelius prize for outstanding research done in the field of rheumatic diseases from the Finnish Medical Society *Finska Läkaresällskapet*.

Yrjö T. Konttinen was active also in many other areas of his academic profession. He was a popular lecturer at international conferences around the world and served on editorial boards and as a peer-reviewer for a large number of international journals. He was an esteemed and respected co-editor since 2005 in *Acta Orthopaedica*. Many authors will remember his detailed and kind rejection letters often suggesting new, and better, experiments. He actively participated in various scientific advisory committees and grant review boards and served as reviewer or opponent for Ph.D. dissertations 50 times. His love of research, teaching and clinical care far overshadowed his lack of fondness for the increasing amount of administrative work and bureaucracy that occasionally came in the way of his scientific work!

Professor Konttinen's important musculoskeletal research network was particularly well developed across Europe in his genuine belief that science and collaboration promoted European unity. Under his direction, European collaboration included various hospital and university groups of Eastern and Western European countries into his projects and network. This intensively collaborating network facilitated the free exchange of ideas; his input directly integrated other European researchers and was crucial to the development of certain COST and RNP European Science Foundation actions, the promotion of EU projects and trials, and the dissemination of science through musculoskeletal meetings or editorial boards in which he participated.

Yrjö T. Konttinen's influence extended far beyond Finland and the European Union. His scientific expertise and gen-

erosity led to fruitful international collaborations spanning numerous institutions and clinics throughout the world, most notably in Europe, Japan and the USA. He formulated critical questions that were best answered by international teams with complementary research skills, rather than by individual laboratories. This spawned important collaborations to investigate subjects such as biocompatibility of orthopaedic implants, the role of the innate immune system, macrophage biology and numerous others. He was a mentor to even the most senior of investigators, offering advice on musculoskeletal research, how to run a research laboratory and become a successful clinician-scientist. He was particularly supportive and encouraging of young scientists and clinicians, whom he educated with great enthusiasm, actively looking for opportunities to promote their success.

In addition of being an internationally known researcher Yrjö T. Konttinen was a dedicated teacher of medicine. In his teaching of medical students and residents he emphasized the importance of reasoning and common sense; the complicated and often puzzling presentations of diseases could be easily understood and remembered based on profound knowledge of basic physiological and pathophysiological processes. He felt that memorizing exhaustive lists of symptoms and signs was often meaningless.

Yrjö T. Konttinen worked hard but always maintained a relaxed, positive, and humorous attitude towards day-to-day research and teaching; he never grew angry but could become annoyed by unfinished work. He unconditionally helped and supported his students and colleagues, tirelessly guiding projects to their completion. Indeed, he greatly rejoiced not only in scientific discovery but also in the success of his students and colleagues, many of whom also became his close friends.

Earlier in life Yrjö T. Konttinen was an active sportsman, in particular an eager and fast runner. In his later years Yrjö T. Konttinen relaxed by cooking, studying European history and Greek mythology as well as by spending time with his family who were a constant source of support, joy and happiness for him. Yrjö T. Konttinen's early passing is a great loss for the international musculoskeletal research community, for his students, friends and colleagues, and, in particular, for his wife Margaretha, children Liisa and Lasse, and three grandchildren.

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