

Pierre Dejours

29 March 1922 – 10 January 2009



We lost a great scientist and dear friend. And we have lost one of the great heroes of physiology.

Dejours' scientific career spanned more than forty years.

Graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1950, he had become so enamored with physiology that, during the final years of formal study, he worked in the Laboratoire de Physiologie de Faculté de Médecine de Paris. Shortly after receiving his degree, he was selected by the French government for advanced study abroad, and spent a year in Rochester, New York, where he worked with Wallace O. Fenn and Hermann Rahn. One may well speculate whether it is not through the guidance and encouragement of these two great men that he developed his

latent talent for looking at the bigger question that lurks behind every smaller one, or at the fundamental problem that is locked inside every practical issue. That ability, for which he is justly recognized, was to serve him well when, upon his return from the United States, he divided his time between the Physiology Laboratory and the brand new Centre Marie-Lannelongue. It was during this period that his name became familiar to every respiratory physiologist.

Among the crucial reports originating from his laboratory were the description of the hypercapnea that follows passive mobilization of the limbs (thus demonstrating the existence of peripheral mechano-receptors acting on the respiratory center) and of the ventilatory depression caused by inspiration of a single breath of oxygen. Either one of these phenomena may not necessarily be more important than others in terms of impact, nevertheless, they clearly underscore Dejours' early interest in integration and regulation, fields which were to emerge as the two principal areas of research to which he directed his investigations. It is not surprising that concern with these matters should have led him to examine the regulation of the human respiratory function under environmental loads – notably hypoxia – or during exercise; but, as time elapsed, Dejours also gradually shifted the focus of his activity towards comparative physiology, initially only as a backup for his human studies, but later as a significant field in its own right.

In later years, Dejours' interests have become progressively more encompassing, on

different planes. Man, who had been the centrepiece of his earlier work, was now beginning to be ranked merely as one of the numerous species in the evolving animal kingdom. In the area of control of breathing, the specific aspects of respiration receded as the broad line of regulation in general (of which respiration became only a sub-set) came to the fore. There can be no doubt that even the specific questions dealing with the respiratory system benefited through being examined in a broader context.

If Dejours' interest in science as a wide field had become apparent only over the years, the universality of the scientific community has been the most enduring of his abiding concerns. While other Frenchmen may have bemoaned the necessity to leave Paris, the heart of France, Dejours was delighted to move to Strasbourg, which in his words "Put him closer to the center of Europe". His realization of the true importance of communication on an international level for all of us motivated his shrewd decision to insist that *Respiration Physiology*, the journal that he founded in 1966 and led for over twenty years, should be published in English, a step that was to be proved to be ahead of its time; it was followed by other journals only much later.

I well remember the first time I met Pierre Dejours. It was at the occasion of an international symposium in Göttingen, and he insisted to see the Johannes Piiper's laboratories and talk to his coworkers. Pierre asked precise questions and expected on precise responses. I was somewhat scared and uneasy at this insistent interrogation, but it did not take long that I understood that he was not only interested in what he saw and heard but also offered help and advice wherever he could. He was relentless as a scientist but supportive without any sign of egotism. Many of us saw him sitting in the back in the conference room, his pencil at his lips, participating in the discussion with an amazing wealth of knowledge. But he was also amiable; the photo reminds us of a garden party at the Piipers on the occasion of one of the Göttingen symposia. He has been a wonderful teacher and friend for so many of us.

When Pierre retired in 1989, he offered me to follow him as Editor-in-Chief of *Respiration Physiology*. Without his continued support over the next years I would not have managed to keep the quality of the journal. When we later changed the name of the journal to *Respiratory Physiology & Neurobiology* he gladly agreed on this move since he also felt that respiratory control had become more prominent when the big questions in other areas had apparently been brought closer to their solution.

It is pleasing to see that Dejours' contributions have been given the true recognition they deserve in many ways: honorary doctorates; membership and honorary membership of prestigious professional societies; key appointments to various bodies, including the International Union of Physiological Sciences; and, the crowning glory, his election in 1991 as regular member to the Académie des Sciences.

We will miss Pierre Dejours, but I am confident that many will join me in keeping him in their memories and their hearts.

Peter Scheid

Göttingen, January 2009