Rolf Luft, MD, PhD (1914-2007)

Rolf Luft was not a card-carrying neurologist but a distinguished endocrinologist particularly well-known for his studies on diabetes mellitus. Why, then, should we celebrate his life and mourn his death in a neurological journal? In 1962, Professor Luft published an article in the *Journal of Clinical Investigation* that opened the door to what, 32 years later in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, he called “mitochondrial medicine.” The article in the journal, which is an example of translational research at its best, described a single patient with severe hypermetabolism not due to thyroid dysfunction but—and this was Dr Luft’s genial intuition—to “loose coupling” of muscle mitochondria. Although only 1 other patient with Luft disease was ever found and the molecular basis of this rare disorder remains unknown, Luft disease was the first biochemically defined mitochondrial disease and first example of “organellar medicine.” To let Dr Luft speak for himself:

I was in the position to undertake the first studies of a cell organelle in humans in 1959-62. They were performed following observations made at the bedside of a patient with striking symptoms never encountered before. These clinical observations, first, led to an idea about the origin of the symptoms, and, second, to studies of this particular organelle, the mitochondrion.

Needless to say, mitochondrial disease has become a vast, and still rapidly expanding, field of medicine that is especially relevant to neurologists both because of the high dependence of the central and peripheral nervous systems on oxidative metabolism and because of the importance of oxidative stress and programmed cell death in neurology.

Rolf Luft obtained his MD degree in 1940 and his PhD degree in 1944: he spent all of his career at the Karolinska Hospital and Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, where he became professor of endocrinology in 1961. To pick just a few of his innumerable honors, he was a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Sweden; fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of the United Kingdom; foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; president of the International Diabetes Federation from 1973 to 1980; member of the Nobel Committee from 1973 to 1979; and chairman of the Nobel Committee for Physiology and Medicine from 1976 to 1978. He received honorary doctorates from the universities of Salamanca, Spain; Ulm, Germany; and Toronto, Canada.

Rolf Luft remained active to the very end of his long and productive life. Despite his monumental contributions to endocrinology, he took special pride in the fact that his discovery of the first mitochondrial disease made him an honorary neurologist. As neurologists, we recognize our debt of gratitude to him and offer to his colleagues at the Karolinska Institute and to his wife, Ritva, our heartfelt condolences.

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