

In memoriam



Volker Henn 1943–1997

Born in Gotha, Germany, Volker Henn studied Medicine in Munich, Vienna and Berlin. Here he received his M.D. degree working with O.J. Grüsser on the visual system of the frog (1968). After continuing his clinical training, Volker Henn became research fellow at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, and, with B. Cohen, investigated the physiology of extra-ocular motoneurons and pontine saccadic burst neurons in rhesus monkeys (1970/71). Thereafter Volker Henn joined the Neurology department at Zürich University Hospital, Switzerland, where, until his death, he worked both as a clinical neurologist (professor of Neurology since 1984) and basic researcher.

Soon after his arrival in Zürich, Volker Henn established a primate laboratory that, over the years, became an eminent center of vestibulo-oculomotor research worldwide. Countless international collaborators and students from all continents successfully worked with him in his laboratory. The research focused on the neurophysiology of vestibulo-visual interaction, brainstem saccade generation, and eye-position coding of extra-ocular motoneurons. Volker Henn was one of the first to realize that, in order to understand the kinematical principles of vestibulo-oculomotor behavior, one had to build precise three-dimensional vestibular stimulators and record all three rotatory degrees of freedom of the ocular globe. He therefore designed a unique motor-driven three-axis vestibular turntable for rhesus monkeys, which was installed in 1992 and proved to be a very effective tool to explore the kinematics of the vestibular and oculomotor system. Bridging the

gap between basic research and clinical application was one of Volker Henn's main ambitions. Consequently, he conceived a three-axes motor-driven turntable for humans, which was assembled in 1997. At the same time, Volker Henn expanded his research to three-dimensional vestibulo-oculomotor behavior in fish and chameleons. On December 3, 1997, in the midst of this prosperous period, Volker Henn suddenly died due to a malicious vascular condition.

As, with time, the initial shock and sadness over Volker Henn's death slowly fades, one permanent emotion crystallizes among his many friends and colleagues: a sentiment of deep gratitude. Volker Henn was a man of remarkable generosity. He used his outstanding organizational talent to support the scientific work of so many, especially young colleagues at the beginning of their career. He strongly believed in scientific openness and friendship. Whoever came to work with Volker Henn, received his genuine hospitality and enthusiastic support. He always trusted that his colleagues did their best, and so did he. This created a unique scientific atmosphere in the laboratory.

Volker Henn was a universal scholar with interests that reached far beyond medicine and physiology. He possessed a profound love for art, literature, history, and zoology. His collection of antique scientific books amazed everyone who had the chance to see it. Volker Henn had an intuitive ability to quickly solve technical problems, and he was attracted by new technological advances, which he immediately introduced in the laboratory. He was fascinated by the fact that today's scientists now had the technical means to test many ideas of the old masters like Helmholtz and Mach. One of his preferred citations was the phrase by Aristotle that "the sweetest of all things is knowledge".

Volker Henn's favorite area of research during his last years was the oculomotor system of the chameleon. He loved this animal especially for what is symbolized to him: An individual that, at the same time, could look into the future and into the past. This ability was exactly what made Volker Henn an exceptional human being, whom we miss very much.

Zurich
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Dominik Straumann