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In Memoriam

Gabriele Schilling (September 5, 1968—July 4, 2014)

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It is with a great sadness that we note the passing of Dr. Gabriele Schilling, who lost her battle with HD at the age of 46. Gabriele (or Gaby) was known to many investigators in the HD field as an energetic young investigator who was dedicated to finding new treatments. She first came to the United States as a visiting student in Christopher Ross's lab at Johns Hopkins, then returned to Dr. Ross's lab to complete a PhD (which she received from the University of Witten-Herdecke in 2000), during which time she developed one of the first mouse models of HD (N171-82Q), in collaboration with David Borchelt and investigators at the National Cancer Institute. She stayed on at Hopkins to do a postdoc in Borchelt's lab, continuing cell and mouse studies of HD. She then returned to Germany in 2005 to set up her own lab at the University of Jena, Fritz-Lipmann-Institut), continuing to focus on HD.

Like many HD expansion carriers, she kept her personal risk for developing HD a secret. Only when she could no longer hide the emerging symptoms did she reveal her gene status. Her rationale for hiding her risk was the fear of discomfort that might arise when she engaged in research related discussions, which for better or worse often remove the human element and focus on the disease as an entity to be studied and understood rather than a human condition. It is hard to fathom the courage it took to look so hard at her possibilities with the constant daily reminders of what her future could hold.

Among her many publications [1–22], she will be best remembered for her ground-breaking contributions to the development of mouse models for HD (the fragment transgenic "N171-82Q") and the closely related polyglutamine disease DRPLA (9,10,15,19). A search of PubMed with the target of "N171-82Q" indicates that 64 papers have been published to date using this model, and it remains widely used for experimental therapeutics. Her passion and drive in generating the HD mice were born from her hope that they might enable the discovery of new treatments.

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Dr. Borchelt remembers a conversation in which he highlighted the value of the HD mouse model to understand "what makes them sick", and she responded that "the only thing that matters is figuring out how to cure them."

Sadly, the breakthrough that she–and many other HD expansion carriers–desired did not come in time. As the disease began to take hold, she spoke of her continued dream that her effort would one day make a difference. She devoted her effort in the last productive years of her career to understanding how the endoproteolytic cleavage of huntingtin may contribute to the generation of toxic protein fragments.

She leaves us with a legacy of discovery, courage, and endurance that will hopefully motivate future generations of young scientists to work towards those breakthrough discoveries that we all desire.

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Gabriele is survived by her sister Stefanie Schilling who provided the photograph and guidance on the content of the memorial.

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