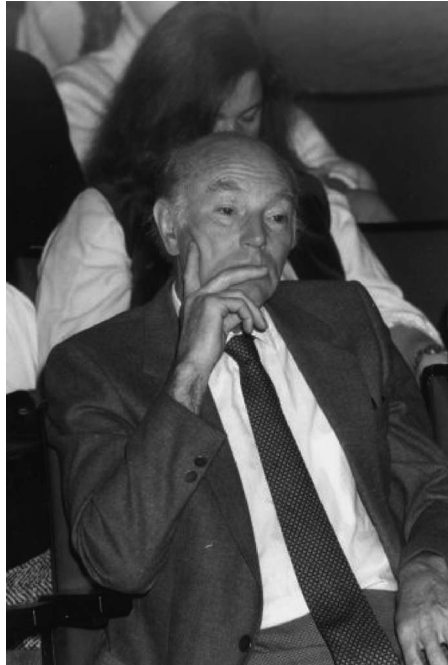


OBITUARY

Robert Wiedersheim MD, PhD (1919–2005)



Robert Wiedersheim was one of the select few European pioneers of 20th Century medical education.

Robert was born into a German medical family with wider roots in Italy and Belgium.

He received his MD and PhD through his research work at the Institute for Pharmacology and Physiology in Freiburg, during and soon after the end of the Second World War. His next move was to a university in South Africa. From there he was appointed Associate Professor at the George Washington University in the USA. This led him to an appointment with the World Health Organization in Haiti (1960) and Dominica (1964) where he was responsible for the development of curricula of new medical schools. From the Caribbean he was transferred to WHO Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland until 1974. During this time he spent several months at Johns Hopkins School

of Public Health and a further period in Paris to study medical education as practised in France.

His next move until his retirement found him in Copenhagen, Denmark as director of the Department for Health Manpower Development at the European Office of the World Health Organization. It was during this time that Robert undertook the task of assembling an annotated bibliography of nearly 3000 publications on medical education (1946–1955), published by the World Health Organization. This formidable task demonstrated his talent for detailed scholarship and his commitment to medical education.

At the age of 60 years and retirement from WHO he spent a brief and somewhat frustrating period at the Academy for Public Health in Düsseldorf, back in Germany.

This proved to be a splendid opportunity to persuade Wiedersheim to accept the appointment of Foundation Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the only private university in Germany, the University of Witten/Herdecke. All his international experience and his up-to-date knowledge from a wide ranging network came to be employed in the creation of the first German Problem-Based Learning curriculum. The course incorporated outstanding, liberal elements, in order to balance *curing* with *caring*. This sensitive approach to the development of the next generation of German physicians accepted its first students in 1983. Robert Wiedersheim demonstrated to the full his outstanding ability to encourage and guide his colleagues through searching questions, as well as with selfless support. His aim was that medical education should enable his graduates to deal with unfamiliar situations, to adapt to, and participate in the management of change, to cooperate with others, to continue to perfect their skills in the various aspects of communication and to practise self-directed learning throughout their professional lives. While these aims may be taken for granted in many parts of the world, some countries may still see these expectations as “soft” compared with traditional emphasis on knowledge acquisition in its own right. Robert emphasized the translation of theory into practice and he expected his students to reflect on what they had learned in their clinical encounters. His tenacity and persistence were tested to the full in negotiating with various authorities in a climate of economic constraint and conservative conventions which regarded pure research as the primary aim of higher education.

After his retirement Robert remained at Witten/Herdecke for a further two years, when his outstanding contributions were recognized by the conferment of an Honorary Professorship.

He was now able to devote his attention to supporting the early development of the parallel track with “Problem-Oriented Learning”, integration and early clinical contact at the Faculty of Medicine, Free University, subsequently at the Charité, Humboldt University in Berlin. Robert’s

final retirement to a small rural community in Bavaria was blessed by the love and care of his young partner. Their two small boys enlivened his remaining years which were clouded by the progressive effects of his long standing diabetes.

Robert treasured a map of the world with some forty coloured pins which related to the many medical schools which had benefited from his wise guidance. Robert Wiedersheim deserves an honourable place among the pioneers of 20th Century medical education. I count myself fortunate and indeed privileged to have known and worked with this extraordinary medical educator.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Professor Wilhelm Rimpau, who made it possible for me to benefit from his contact with Wiedersheim's partner, Elizabeth Umbreit, his grown up son Keith Wiedersheim, and Dr Peter van Leeuwen who very kindly provided the photograph of Robert Wiedersheim. A full obituary in German has been published by Professor Rimpau in *Zeitschrift für Medizinische Ausbildung*, 22(4) (2005) <http://www.egebs.de/en/journals/zma/2005-22/zma000063.shtml>

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