

Professor Andrew Szczeklik: how I will remember him

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The name *Szczeklik* has been well known to Polish medical students for the last half of the century at least. It also applies to me. When I was a third-year medical student, one of my course requirements was to thoroughly study the basic handbook on the introduction to clinical medicine, the book on physical examination, and bedside diagnostics authored by Professor Edward Szczeklik, the father of Professor Andrew Szczeklik. This book, which the students nicknamed "The Small Szczeklik",¹ was the fundamental source of knowledge for numerous generations of Polish students of medicine. The last course of my medical education required that all students be studying "The Big Szczeklik",² a two-volume handbook of internal medicine also edited by Professor Edward Szczeklik. A year before my graduation, I received a new, enlarged, and updated edition of "The Small Szczeklik";³ the book was authored for the first time by two authors: Professor Edward Szczeklik and his son, Andrew. It was probably the first time I had come across the name of Professor Andrew Szczeklik. Obtaining the new edition of the book was not easy at all. Due to a limited edition of printed copies, which resulted from restricted access to paper materials at the publishing house, only a few of those lucky ones were able to get the book and could pride themselves on owning it. Including me. When I reach back in time, I remember that many of us, medical students just before graduation, were craving the Szczeklik's book and, thus, were looking for any connections with the staff at bookshops. I am pleased that the current generation of medical students in Poland listens to these memories as if they were a fairy tale.

In the late 1970s, I was working in the field of clinical biochemistry, and although my scientific interests focused on the connective tissue metabolism, just as all my colleagues who also were young research workers, I was impressed and proud of great discoveries made by a Pole, Professor Andrew Szczeklik, in the area of prostaglandins and their role in the development of atherosclerosis as well as clinical application of prostacyclin. Each piece of news which was published by newspapers or broadcast by the radio or television was discussed in details in the laboratory

I was working in. When I cast back my mind, I am still experiencing the same thrilling excitement we had in those days. Finally, Poles made an astonishing contribution to the world's medicine after so many years of not being significantly visible.

The turn of the 1970s/1980s brought about meaningful political changes. The Solidarity Union was founded in 1980 and, a year later, was crushed down by brutal martial law imposed by the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland. After years, I learnt that Professor Andrew Szczeklik actively participated in the movement of freedom and suffered persecution because of his actions. In the dark days of the martial law, the 16th International Congress of Internal Medicine took place in the neighboring country, Czechoslovakia (Prague). It presented an extraordinary opportunity to participate in a world meeting of internists at relatively low costs and within "the iron curtain" area. It had taken several months and a number of applications before I received a permission to go abroad carrying a passport with a stamp inside stating "Valid for Czechoslovakia only". I went to Prague to take part in the congress. The only invited lecture to be delivered by a Pole was the lecture on prostaglandins and atherosclerosis presented by Professor Andrew Szczeklik. I still remember the mesmerized audience listening to the lecture and taking in every word that was said, and I keep in mind both the soft voice of the lecturer and the unusual figures illustrating the lecture:⁴ the prostacyclin was depicted as an angel and thromboxane as a devil. It was probably the first time I had seen Professor Andrew Szczeklik in person.

Three years later, I moved to the United States. In 1986, *The Lancet*⁵ published my short letter on the forgotten priority of Edmund Biernacki to discover the erythrocyte sedimentation rate. Two weeks after the publication of the paper, I received a congratulations letter from Professor Andrew Szczeklik. For me, a still young researcher in those days, it was a pure joy and honor I cannot express in words.

Upon my return to Poland, in 1991, I was elected secretary general of the Polish Society of Internal Medicine. Since the election, and particularly in the period of my presidency at the Polish Society

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FIGURE 25 After the meeting of the Executive Board of the Polish Society of Internal Medicine. From the left: Professor Andrew Szczeklik, Professor Eugeniusz J. Kucharz, Dr Anna Kotulska, Professor Franciszek Kokot, Dr Robert Pieczyrak, Warsaw, 9 March 2006

of Internal Medicine (2004–2008), I would meet Professor Andrew Szczeklik on numerous occasions. I never ceased to be impressed by his ability to judge problems with consideration of all existing circumstances and factors, by his peaceful attitude towards all people and a great wisdom. Meeting Professor Andrew Szczeklik always constituted an intellectual pleasure. He was a modest man. When I was preparing a biography of his late father (Professor Edward Szczeklik), which was to be published in the *Polish Archives of Internal Medicine*,⁶ I asked him to review the manuscript. He agreed and made it with unusual modesty. I was surprised to notice that his small corrections took a form of kind proposals to alter the manuscript.

In the last two decades, we would meet on the occasions of conferences and meetings of the Society. I participated in the ceremony of conferring Professor Andrew Szczeklik the title of an honorary degree at the Medical University of Silesia in Zabrze. I feel honored to be a co-author of his great book, *Internal medicine*,⁷ and that my translation of the Hippocratic Oath⁸ was appreciated by him and was mentioned in his book, *Kore*.⁹

In February 2012, during the proceedings of the Second Systemic Sclerosis Congress in Madrid, I received a text message, “Professor Szczeklik passed away”. This heartbreaking news was so tragic that I could not believe it. I immediately called up a friend of mine back in Poland and asked him to verify this information: “Check it please, it may be a spam”. Unfortunately, it was not ...

When Professor Anetta Undas, the editor-in-chief of the *Polish Archives of Internal Medicine* turned to me with a request to write a few words in memory of Professor Andrew Szczeklik, I hesitated. Neither was I his close coworker, nor his disciple, but when I took more time and

reflected on it, I realized that it is outstanding personalities such as Professor Andrew Szczeklik that inspire and significantly influence even those who are not their close or everyday collaborators. In fact, I owe so much to Professor Andrew Szczeklik. His personality radiated a unique value that encapsulated a real essence of medicine, i.e., the will and ability to treat a human being, an individual that is unique both as a human spirit and a very complex human body.¹⁰ Medicine is changing quickly, new findings substitute old theories, but medicine is something more than science. It is the art of healing a suffering individual. And yet, this simple statement, so difficult to be put into everyday practice, was the foundation of the entire professional life of Professor Andrew Szczeklik, not only a great physician, but also a great man above all. I feel grateful for being given the chance to meet, listen to, and discuss diverse topics with Professor Andrew Szczeklik. I am sure that he undoubtedly had a substantial influence upon my personal development as well.

Professor Andrew Szczeklik enjoyed music and took particular pleasure in playing the piano. I believe that he is now listening to angels’ music accompanied by warm memories, thoughts, and prayers of uncountable patients, physicians, and friends coming up from so many places from here, the Earth.

Non omnis moriar.

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