

Andrzej Szczeklik: visionary, pathfinder, Renaissance man

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Upon hearing the stunning news about Andrzej Szczeklik's untimely death, I was overwhelmed by its suddenness. I learned from Andrzej's wife, Maria, and daughter, Ania, how he was in the thick of things until his last days, planning the next Symposium, preparing his next book, and arranging the next trip. He was a patient in his beloved "Klinika", the 2nd Department of Medicine of the Jagiellonian University Medical College in Krakow. "Klinika" was his brainchild and work in progress ever since the communist authorities assigned Andrzej in 1972 to the Department of Allergy and Clinical Immunology while some of us, his peers, were getting junior faculty positions in Poland and abroad. Andrzej had chosen to stay in his native Poland and by espousing the philosophy of "Organic Work" had turned around his "Post", the old dilapidated Tuberculosis Hospital, into a modern marvel of Internal Medicine; he became its Chairman in 1989. By overcoming huge barriers, he transformed grim wards into functional patient rooms; a new wing was built with diagnostic and research laboratories furnished with the state of the art equipment; a new lecture hall and conference rooms were added, where Andrzej's guests from European and American universities were sharing advanced concepts and technological breakthroughs. A new cadre of students and fellows was rigorously trained to become highly accomplished physician-scientists and scientists. They include, among scores of others, Ewa Niżankowska-Mogilnicka, Anetta Undas (Editor-in-Chief of this Journal), Marek Sanak, and Jacek Musiał, Andrzej's successor as the Chairman of the 2nd Department of Medicine. Among thousands of patients from all walks of life, treated and studied by "the Professor" and his younger colleagues, were world-renowned writers, philosophers, editors, and moviemakers.

Andrzej's vision for clinical research foreshadowed the present-day emphasis on translational studies. Sidney Brenner, the 2002 Nobel Prize winner in Physiology and Medicine for his discovery of messenger RNA, has called, in his lecture on "The Next 100 Years of Biology", for the



FIGURE 20 Professor Szczeklik in the Tatra Mountains that offered to him solace and inspiration; picture taken by the author in 1992

exploration of the vast range of genetic diversity that exists among human beings to understand better the complex function of the human body. He admonished his audience at Vanderbilt University in 2006: "Skip the mouse models. Go directly to humans". This was already well practiced by Andrzej Szczeklik and his cadre of younger collaborators. They conducted with Ryszard Gryglewski the first human studies of prostacyclin, developed a new paradigm of aspirin-induced asthma, and studied new parameters of susceptibility to coronary atherothrombosis.

The dizzying pace of advances made in the diagnosis and treatment of major diseases requires protocols tested in well-controlled multi-center studies. Andrzej was a strong believer in the application of the scientific method to human disease

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FIGURE 21 Professor Szczeklik playing his famous white piano at the 2nd Department of Internal Medicine, Krakow, 2005

as the basis for evidence-based medicine. Again, transferring this newly emerging state-of-the-art knowledge base to thousands of practicing physicians, some located far way from academic medical centers, was of great concern to Andrzej and his colleagues. Thus, *Medycyna Praktyczna* was born with Andrzej as its Godfather and Piotr Gajewski as a founding Editor. Piotr and his team have built a learning platform for thousands of practicing internists in the form of the monthly *Medycyna Praktyczna* (*Practical Medicine*). This remarkably effective initiative to elevate the science and practice of medicine in Poland has expanded from a monthly journal of *Internal/General Medicine* into bimonthly editions of *Pediatrics*, *Surgery*, and half a dozen other specialties.

Among all modern amenities in his beloved “Klinika”, Andrzej Szczeklik was particularly proud of one item, the white piano. He was himself an avid piano player, raising the spirits of experts from all over the world participating in Symposia organized by him during the darkest years of Martial Law. In “Klinika”, the white piano was primarily for patients to listen to uplifting music played by Andrzej and his musician-friends. Some of them belong to the legendary bohemian

group holed up in the Piwnica pod Baranami. This avant-garde of satire, poetry, and music viewed Andrzej Szczeklik as one of their own. Indeed, literature, art history, and music were as facile to Andrzej as new concepts in biomedicine and the intricacies of the human genome and human nature. These attributes exude from the pages of two uniquely elegant books that search for the soul of medicine, *Catharsis* and *Kore*. The latter features a beautiful picture of his granddaughter, Zosia. She and other grandchildren, as well as Andrzej’s children, form the core legacy of his extraordinary life. The city of Krakow and European Medicine will not be the same without the iconic Andrzej Szczeklik.

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