Profile

Andrzej Więcek: east meets west in nephrology

In 1985, Andrzej Więcek made a journey that would change his life. Boarding the train in Katowice, the Polish city where he was born and raised, had trained in medicine and nephrology, and, at the age of 35, already had a wife and young family, Więcek set off for a year-long scholarship at the University of Heidelberg in what was then West Germany. The journey from Katowice was only about 1000 km, but for Więcek, who had never before set foot outside Soviet eastern Europe, it felt like he'd arrived on a different planet.

In Katowice, thanks to the expert guidance and ingenuity of the renowned Polish nephrologist Franciszek Kokot, Więcek had access to techniques such as hormone assays that were unheard of elsewhere in eastern Europe, but research was still a struggle. "Even small details in the laboratory like tubes, cannulas, parafilm, everything was very limited, and we often had to reuse things many times that should have only been used once", he recalls. In Heidelberg, under the stewardship of Eberhard Ritz, Więcek was trained in cutting-edge research methods at the university’s Department of Nephrology. In the three decades since, Więcek and the research group he now leads at the Department of Nephrology, Endocrinology and Metabolic Diseases at Katowice’s Medical University of Silesia have made a name for themselves in everything from cardiovascular disease and anaemia in patients with renal failure to the role of adipose tissue as an endocrine organ—Więcek’s main research focus at present. But the most important legacy of that time in Heidelberg, he says, are the good friends he made. "They are still good friends. We still collaborate a lot even 30 years later."

That sense of connection, an antidote to the isolation he felt during those early days in Katowice, is something Więcek has always cherished. At the same time as being Professor of Internal Medicine and Nephrology and department head at the Medical University of Silesia, Więcek has found time to play a leading part in the European Renal Association-European Dialysis and Transplant Association (ERA-EDTA). Alexander (Sandy) Davison, a past President of the ERA-EDTA who has been affiliated with the organisation since the 1970s, recalls Więcek as “initially rather shy”, but says he “rapidly developed and made significant contributions at all Council meetings”. After twice being elected a Council Member, and subsequently serving a 3-year stint as Secretary-Treasurer, Więcek became President of the organisation in 2014. “This is testament to the enormous respect and affection that the European nephrology community has for him, and indeed, this also applies throughout the rest of the world”, says Jonathan Fox, a consultant nephrologist at the Glasgow Renal and Transplant Unit in the UK and current ERA-EDTA Secretary-Treasurer.

One of Więcek’s abiding passions is nurturing the next generation of nephrologists, particularly in eastern Europe. As well as helping to establish pioneering continuing medical education (CME) courses for nephrologists in Europe with his long-time collaborator Ritz, he also used his election as Secretary-Treasurer of ERA-EDTA in 2011 to put forward several initiatives to help younger colleagues take part in the organisation. “Andrzej has a real commitment to supporting younger nephrologists”, says Fox; “he conceived and initiated the ERA-EDTA’s highly successful Young Nephrologists’ Platform, which involves younger members in all the activities of the Association”, while the CME courses he initiated go from strength to strength. It’s hard to know where he finds the hours in the day, but that same sense of total commitment that he saw in others was what inspired Więcek to go into medicine in the first place. “I was first inspired by some friends of my parents. I remember when I was very young I visited a hospital with my father to meet a friend of my parents, a young lady doctor. Hospitals are never nice places to be, but at that time in the 1970s in Poland the hospitals were not well equipped. The doctor told us that she had just come back from her holidays, and she said that during her holidays all she dreamt about were her patients and getting back to the hospital. I was so impressed, and I thought there must be something extraordinary, some kind of magnetic field, that brings even young people who have many other interesting things to do back to the hospital.”

That chance meeting spurred him on to the entrance exams for the Medical University of Silesia, where fate had an even greater surprise in store. By alphabetical arrangement Więcek found himself sitting next to his future wife, Beata. “We met after each exam to discuss what we thought the answers were, and then we started to meet each other more and more once we got into medical school. We married after 6 years, when we graduated, and now we have two sons, who did not follow in their father’s footsteps.” By that time, he had already met Kokot, a leading researcher not just in Poland but throughout eastern and central Europe, and who had a huge influence on the understanding of the role of hormones in the pathogenesis of hypertension and uraemia. Kokot took Więcek under his wing when the younger man was still in medical school, and asked him to join the Department of Nephrology, Endocrinology and Metabolic Diseases that Więcek now leads. It was Kokot who first saw Więcek’s potential, and who first encouraged him to make that journey from Katowice to Heidelberg in 1985. Now, 30 years later, it’s Więcek who is helping to build the foundations for a new century of nephrology in Europe.

David Holmes