

Pekka Häyry

* 13.12.1939 † 29.4.2020



PEKKA HÄYRY WAS born in Vihti, Finland, in 1939 and died at Lohja in late April 2020 from complications arising from a myelodysplastic syndrome.

Häyry studied medicine at the University of Helsinki and became an MD in 1965. He was already involved as a medical student in initiating research into basic cell biology under the supervision of Professor Lauri Saxén, and he finished his PhD thesis in 1966. He then took up a post-doctoral position at the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia, where he made a discovery that would have a major impact on his coming career. Together with his mentor, Vittorio Defendi, he published a seminal paper in *Science* showing that a unidirectional mixed lymphocyte culture would generate allospecific cytotoxic cells, i.e. it was an *in vitro* model for allograft rejection.

After his return to Finland in 1970 Häyry continued his research at the III Department of Pathology at the University of Helsinki, focusing on functional characterization of the cell populations active in allograft responses. In parallel with this research he worked as a resident in the Department of Surgery at Helsinki University Hospital and became a specialist in surgery in 1973. In 1979 he was appointed

Professor of Transplant Surgery and Immunology.

When the Finnish parliament announced in 1974 that special funding was available on application for efforts to improve the outcome of organ transplantations, Häyry together with his mentor in surgery, Professor Theodor Scheinin, managed to obtain the necessary capital to starting a Transplantation Laboratory, which rapidly became the leading unit in Finland for research and diagnostics in this field, with Häyry as chairman until his retirement.

In addition to basic research, Häyry and his colleagues developed a system for monitoring rejection and other events affecting transplanted organs. This was based on cytological analyses of sequential fine needle biopsies from the transplanted organ. The method gained a widespread reputation, and almost one hundred international researchers visited the Transplantation Laboratory with a view to adopting the technique.

When the development of new potent modalities for immunosuppression transformed acute rejection into a manageable problem, Häyry focused his research on chronic rejection and in particular on

pathogenic mechanisms leading to the vascular changes seen during chronic rejection of transplanted organs.

Häyry had a large international collaborative network and spent several periods as a visiting professor at universities in Europe, Canada and Australia. He was also chairman of several international congresses on transplantation and was elected president of the international Transplantation Society for the years 1996–1998.

Häyry gained recognition for his achievements in the form of the most prominent Finnish medical prize, the Matti Äyräpää Prize, in 1988, and the prestigious Sir Peter Medawar Medal and Prize in 2006.

Among his numerous decorations were those of a Commander of the Order of the Lion of Finland and the Order of the White Rose of Finland. He was also a Commander of the Finnish Order of the Holy Lamb, the Italian Order of Merit, the Argentinean Orden de Mayo al Mérito and the Greek Order of the Phoenix. Häyry was elected a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1989.

In 1979 Häyry acquired the Sakkola farm in Karjalohja, where he kept horses and sheep that he immunized for the commercial production of antibodies for diagnostic and research use. In the mid-1980s Häyry converted to the Orthodox faith and started building a chapel at Sakkola in the Byzantine style, which was finished in 1997.

Thanks to his many contacts with medical companies, Häyry managed to obtain donations of medicines and equipment for hospitals in the Middle East run by the Orthodox Patriarchate. For this philanthropic activity he received several decorations from the Orthodox Church, and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople awarded him the honorary title of "Archon Megas Referandarios"

Pekka Häyry was a multifaceted and colourful personality, a combination of talent, diligence and never-failing self-confidence which was the secret behind his extraordinary achievements. His sometimes frank and outspoken statements could cause irritation, but deep down he was an empathic person who was always willing to help.

*Obituary by Leif C. Andersson
and Risto Ihamuotila*