



Erkki Saxén

* 23.8.1921 † 24.8.2021

Professor Arno Erik (Erkki) Saxén was born in Helsinki on 23 August 1921 and died in Helsinki on 24 August 2021 at the age of 100 years and one day.

Saxén spent his childhood in Helsinki and on the family farm of Wetterkulla in Eräjärvi. He went to school at Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu, graduated in 1939 and became a physician in 1947. He became a Doctor of Medicine and Surgery after defending his dissertation in 1948 and was qualified as a Specialist in Pathology in 1953. He worked at both the University of Helsinki and as Head of Clinical Pathology at the Helsinki University Central Hospital. Saxén was appointed the Swedish Professor of Pathological Anatomy in 1961 and received the Finnish professorship in 1978. As a supervisor, he was always fair and just. When walking in the Department of Pathology, he would always jingle a big bunch of keys in his hand so that we would hear him coming and at least pretend to be working.

He was an internationally well-known expert in cancer diseases. He was also a distinguished practical pathologist and instructor who taught both students and numerous specialising physicians. Saxén retired in 1986.

One of his most notable and far-reaching achievements was establishing the Finnish Cancer Registry in 1952. The comprehensive registry serves both patients and researchers. Saxén was the Director of the Cancer Registry since its establishment all the way until 1987.

Saxén was a pioneer in 1951 as one of the first Finnish post doc researchers at the Cancer Institute of the USA in Washington. The trip was a success. One of the most important contributions of the trip to Finland was networking – even before the actual word was invented. Saxén met some of the world's leading experts in cancer diseases and later used his contacts to arrange trips for many young Finns to the same institute.

Saxén also worked actively in several international roles. Among others, he was President of the International Academy of Pathology from 1980–1982, and Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Cancer, the leading journal in the field, from 1965–1984. He received several recognitions in his home country. Erkki Saxén was a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters since 1973.

Erkki Saxén cherished his family. He married Licentiate in Medicine Eva Ryti in

1947. They had four daughters, with whom their father enjoyed hiking, fishing and travelling.

As a grandfather, Saxén would often take his grandchildren to the family farm on the weekends. Nature and the farm were important to him, and he spent as much free time as possible in Eräjärvi. He learned the secrets of farming at a mature

age and took care of the farm for decades.

In 1960, Saxén and his brother Lauri established the famous scientific community named Wetterkulla Medical Center. It consisted of ten leading researchers who regularly met twice a year for 35 years. The one-week programme included writing articles, giving presentations, outdoor recreation and conversations.

Obituary by Hannu Sariola

Photo: Irma Thesleff