

Obituary: Prof. Dr. Meinrad Schär, 1921–2007

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If someone deserves to be called *the* pioneer of Social and Preventive Medicine in Switzerland, it is Meinrad Schär. “*We owe the fact that Preventive Medicine established itself in Switzerland mainly to Meinrad Schär. He was the most suited man to be appointed Chair of the first University Department of Social and Preventive Medicine*

in Switzerland, and as a professional in Social and Preventive Medicine to become a parliament member ...”. This is how a tribute for his sixtieth birthday – written jointly by the Heads of the Institutes of Social and Preventive Medicine of the Universities of Basel, Berne, Geneva and Lausanne, the Director of the Swiss Federal Office of Health, the Dean of the Medical Faculty of the University of Zürich and his colleagues in his own department at the University of Zürich¹ – began. Such joint tributes are rare, and indeed Meinrad Schär merits to be tributed once more after his death, which occurred on 27 November 2007.

Meinrad Schär was born in 1921. He grew up in Basel, where he was trained and worked as a laboratory technician. Soon, through second-chance education, he gained the necessary qualification to enter university, passed his medical exams in 1951, and in the same year obtained the Diploma for Tropical Medicine from the Swiss Tropical Institute in Basel. A scholarship enabled him to do research in immunobiology and physiology in California from 1952 to 1954, and this gave him the chance to also explore the perspective of modern Public Health. From 1954 to 1956 he studied Public Health at the University of California in Berkeley, and as the

first Swiss and the best student of his class of 77 students, he obtained his Master’s degree in Public Health¹.

After his return to Switzerland, he became a staff member of the Swiss Federal Office of Health and in 1961 became its Vice Director. His work in introducing oral poliomyelitis immunization brought international attention upon him. As a true applied scientist, he engaged himself to implementing new scientific insights, when he was convinced of their ethical value. What’s more, he was also a social innovator, who laid the foundation for several of Switzerland’s institutions in the area of Public Health.

Of particular importance was that in the early 1960s Meinrad Schär and the then Federal Councilor Hanspeter Tschudi introduced Social and Preventive Medicine as a compulsory element of the Federal Final Medical Examinations. Switzerland is still among the leading countries in Western Europe in terms of the importance placed on this discipline within Medical Education.

In 1962, the University of Zürich appointed Meinrad Schär as the country’s first full-time Professor of Social and Preventive Medicine and, until his retirement in 1987, he directed the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine in Zürich. With his determination he took us with him in the journey of implementing the new insights of Preventive Medicine of that time, and he will be remembered as a *primus inter pares*, who was always in good mood, energetic, helpful, cooperative: A genuinely good colleague.

A very important milestone for the Swiss Society for Public Health is that in 1972 Meinrad Schär was instrumental, in bringing together the Swiss Society for Preventive Medicine, where at that time he was serving as the president and the Swiss Society of Social Medicine. Meinrad Schär became the first president of the resulting Swiss Society for Social and Preventive Medicine which, due to the increasing multidisciplinary nature, was later renamed Swiss Society for Prevention and

Public Health and more recently Public Health Switzerland – Swiss Society for Public Health.

Of course, Meinrad Schär's activities reflect not only the stage of development of the discipline at that time, but also the fact that he recognized and put promptly into practice the latest developments in the area. In view of the discovery of that time, that individual health behaviour played an important role in causing cancer, heart and circulatory disease and lung disease, he initiated the Swiss Health Education Foundation (later re-named Radix), as well as the cancer register of the Canton of Zürich. In 1968 Meinrad Schär published the first edition of his Compendium of Social and Preventive Medicine (German and French versions), which for many years served as the standard reference and teaching aid not only for medical students, but also for nurses, nutritionists and other health professionals.

Meinrad Schär recognized the societal and political dimensions of prevention, which explains his engagement as National Councilor (member of parliament, 1975–82) and as member (1964–80) and Chair (1973–80) of the Federal Nutrition Commission.

Meinrad Schär was a pioneer of prevention and early detection of chronic diseases of our time, and he lived accordingly to his teachings. He could be seen swimming daily indoors or outdoors, and during the summer he used to swim long distances in the lake of Zürich. Shortly before reaching retirement age and while swimming, he noticed a kind of breathlessness for the first time. This led him to seek medical help. After having tests for anemia and intestinal bleeding, early stage colon cancer was detected and surgically removed. As a result, he gained more than twenty further years of life, mostly in good health, as well as opportunities for getting involved further in activities in the interest of the Society.

Meinrad Schär has already gone down in history of Public Health in Switzerland, and he deserves our cordial appreciation for what he has achieved.

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References

1. Meinrad Schär und die Sozial- und Präventivmedizin in der Schweiz: Eine Würdigung zum Sechzigsten Geburtstag. *Soz. Präev. Med.* 1981;26:209–15.

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