



Obituary

In Memoriam Ralf Kohnen, PhD, Professor of Clinical Psychology



13 March 1948 - 1 March 2014

Ralf Kohnen, Professor of Clinical Psychology, was an expert in clinical trials in restless legs syndrome (RLS), psychiatry and biometrics. He had a certain genius in finding solutions for unresolved questions on clinical trial designs, efficacy assessments, developing scales, and biometrics.

He began his academic career as a psychologist following theological studies at the Protestant Lutheran Church in Munich, Germany. He completed a psychology degree, and then obtained his Doctor of Philosophy, PhD, in 1979 from the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany. He continued his research in clinical psychology as a research assistant at the same university earning Doctor of Science in 1986 with his *habilitation universitaire* published in 1987 as “Pharmaka und Soziales Verhalten” (Pharmaceutical drugs and social behavior).

During the early years of his career he turned his attention to clinical trials. He investigated driving safety and the effects of psychopharmacological treatment, alcohol and caffeine on concentration and driving. He became a specialist in investigating the effects of sedative drugs on performance and evaluated factors influencing effects of sedation in pharmacological clinical trials. Thus began his study of sleep and wakefulness.

From 1980 to 1990, he worked as an assistant professor at the Universities of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Hamburg and Würzburg before founding his own company, the Institute for Medical Research Management and Biometrics GmbH (IMEREM) in Nürnberg. This enabled him to finally develop all of his skills, from management and research of clinical trials to biometrics, medical writing and especially advising researchers and sponsors in developing and executing clinical trial protocols. IMEREM's management of a clinical trial was not that of a simple contract research organization (CRO), but rather a carefully tailored package consisting of good advice, perfect CRO, biometrical analysis, and even the writing of the first drafts of manuscripts.

Ralf was a pioneer in RLS therapeutic research in the 1990s, first in Germany then in Europe and the USA. Together with Wolfgang Oertel and Claudia Trenkwalder, and later with Heike Benes, Ralf convinced the pharmaceutical industry—at that time, Hoffmann La Roche—to start clinical trial programs for RLS. Initially, these were small trials, but within a short time, Ralf paved the way to larger European trial programs. Not only did he convince the industry of the need for trials but he also offered consistently good advice and solved many details in using, sometimes developing

scales for assessment in RLS research. He was a true forerunner in developing solid and reliable RLS trials and emphasized quality methods of assessment such as the comparative trial between L-DOPA and cabergoline. Over the next 20 years, he continued this work becoming one of the leading figures in most of the European research and clinical trial programs in RLS involving UCB (rotigotine), Pfizer (cabergoline, pregabalin), Mundipharma (oxycodone/naloxone), and currently Vifor (iron carboxymaltose). His trial designs were characterized by robust outcome measures, but were also creative, including development of new assessments that brought new insights about the pathophysiology of RLS. He carefully chose centers and educated them. He insisted, politely but vigorously, on changing protocol drafts until achieving a final version that met all desired scientific and safety criteria. Sometimes this was not a quick process, but it was always worthwhile to take the time to listen to his careful and intelligent advice. His most recent and last published trial (*Lancet Neurol*, 2013), was the final outcome of an almost 8-year ongoing project. Unsurprisingly, all the trials that he “managed” were successful—not one failed the primary endpoint!

Whoever needed an answer to a question about clinical trial designs, RLS assessment, scales, or statistics, and even solving a conflict between scientists, Ralf was there with an open ear; he was generous with his time and good advice, and did his utmost to justifiably resolve conflicts.

He was a restless worker, creating an abundance of abstracts and posters, presentations and symposia, sometimes even for us—the clinicians, while we were “busy with patients,” as he used to say. He would offer to “send you a draft and you can look it over,” but in fact, the draft was already a perfect poster or a presentation brimming with new ideas and concepts.

He published over 230 articles, 138 currently cited in PubMed, and he presented his work at numerous conferences, including recent meetings of WASM, ESRS, APSS, and the German Neurological Society. However, his most anticipated presentations were at the EU-RLSSG meeting in Munich, where he always presented his novel research ideas on RLS; his last presentation was in November 2013.

This space is insufficient to describe Ralf’s input on RLS research over the last 20 years, but the important advances he brought to the field should be outlined: he developed the RLS-6 scale, a measure to assess daytime and nighttime RLS symptoms separately; the QoL RLS, a quality of life scale specific for RLS; he played a major role in developing measures for assessment of augmentation such as the ASRS with Diego Garcia-Borreguero and calculated its biometrics, followed by further assessments of augmentation ratings used in clinical trials; and together with Heike Benes, he created and validated the RLS diagnostic index.

In 2008, Ralf decided to adopt a new international working life and sold his company, IMEREM, integrating colleagues and projects into the new company, Research Pharmaceutical Services, Inc. (RPS) in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, USA. He served for some years as the Executive Vice President and Head of Global Scientific

Affairs. Instead of leading an easier life, he became even busier, traveling between Europe and the US, caring about both the European development of RPS and his own research—a difficult task that he successfully resolved!

A sigh of relief spread among the RLS research community when, in 2013, Ralf finally announced he was leaving RPS at the end of the year to continue his “private studies”—we all had so many projects and plans in mind that we wanted to work on with him. We wanted to seize him and his brilliant mind for RLS and sleep research and clinical trials! He promised to start in 2014, but a merciless fate destroyed all plans.

Ralf is survived by his son, Martin Roger Kohnen. Those who knew Ralf privately are aware of how much he cared for him, with whom he enjoyed playing golf and sharing his love of excellent food, wines, and sports cars.

Ralf was intensely engaged in life, and the generosity seen in his professional life was a reflection of that in his personal life where he initiated activities such as the foundation “Cupido classic,” organizing classical music events to support sick children. He also enjoyed collecting art works and paintings. Another interest of his was playing golf in famous resorts all over the world, most recently in Oman, his last trip.

He died, two months after he left his work at RPS and after he had decided to embark upon his new life, in a completely unforeseen and fatal accident that should never have happened. His family, colleagues and friends are stricken with grief that this new life will not happen. Ancillary to losing a wonderful friend, there is a deep and gaping hole in RLS research that cannot be filled.

We are grateful to have known Ralf and to have shared so much with him. “Significant moments” is how he delightfully termed these precious sparkling hours. He intended to write a book with this title—sadly, another project that will never be realized. We will forever treasure those significant and wonderful moments we were fortunate to share with him. Ralf was quiet, thoughtful, and always polite—a true gentleman exuding warmth, charm, integrity, empathy, erudition, and humor. He will be sorely missed.

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