

Obituary: Professor Michael Höllwarth



Fig.1 Professor Michael Höllwarth (1943-2024)

A profound sense of sadness marked the passing of Professor Michael Höllwarth, who died peacefully at home on March 12, 2024, with his partner Christa by his side.

Michael was an outstanding paediatric surgeon and person. During the last three decades, he was an influential force in shaping the progress of our specialty. He was a dynamic and visionary leader who generated respect and admiration throughout his career (Fig.1).

Michael was one of the major architects, both in Europe and Internationally, in the advancement of paediatric surgery. Through his contributions, the impact that this small city of Graz has had on the development of paediatric surgery worldwide is unimaginable.

I first had the pleasure of meeting Michael, together with Massimo Rivosecchi, in 1975 when they were visiting Great Ormond Street Hospital in London to attend a British Council Course on neonatal surgery, while I was a surgical resident there (Fig. 2). I distinctly remember my first interactions with this smart, inquisitive and amicable young man from Austria. Little did I know at that time, that this interaction would blossom into such a long lasting friendship. In the ensuing years, I have such fond memories of our time spent together, from trips to various conferences around the world, long hours spent editing books and journals, and promoting basic science research amongst the young generation of paediatric surgeons. He was a true legend and a wonderful friend.



Fig.2 Professors Massimo Rivosecchi, Prem Puri and Michael Höllwarth

Michael was born on May 3, 1943 in Reutte, Tyrol, Austria. He graduated from the Innsbruck Medical University in 1968 and received his training in General Surgery in 1974. He became Assistant Professor of Paediatric Surgery under Professor Fritz Rehbein in Bremen, Germany. In 1975, he became Associate Professor at the University Clinic for Paediatric Surgery under Professor Hugo Sauer and in 1981 he was elected Full Professor of Paediatric Surgery. From 1985 to 1986, he was Research Associate in the Department of Physiology in Mobile, Alabama, under Professor Neil Granger. From 1989 to 1990, he was Professor and Head of the Department of Paediatric Surgery in Bern, Switzerland. In 1997, he was elected Professor and Head of the University Clinic of Paediatric and Adolescent Surgery at the Medical University in Graz, Austria where he remained until his retirement in 2012. He also served as the Vice Medical Director of the University Hospital of Graz and the General Director for Medicine and Nursing for the Hospitals of the Styrian region of Austria.

One of Michael's greatest achievements was to develop the Paediatric Surgical Centre in Graz, so that it is now considered as one of the best paediatric surgical centres in Europe, particularly in the field of intestinal failure management, sports trauma and accident prevention in children. Michael pioneered the establishment of the Accident Prevention Centre in Graz. Numerous paediatric surgeons from around the world have benefited from his knowledge and teaching in this field. Through his work, he has touched the lives of so many families.

In my opinion, his greatest contribution to the field of paediatric surgery and one which changed the face of paediatric surgery in Europe was the foundation of the European Paediatric Surgeons' Association (EUPSA), with individual membership of paediatric surgeons from all countries in Europe. He was elected the Founding President of the new EUPSA. He had a passion for providing quality surgical care to all children throughout Europe, including Eastern Europe, and he made sure that the annual membership fee of EUPSA was 30 Euros and thus affordable for all. He wrote the Statutes and Bylaws of this organisation, laying foundations for the highest possible standards of education, training and research in our specialty. EUPSA in a short span of time has grown to have the largest membership of paediatric surgeons in the world. Michael made invaluable contributions to enhance the EUPSA brand and its reputation. There is no other person who has worked more years, with more passion and enthusiasm for EUPSA than Michael. Maturity, balance and hard work defined his leadership and served as an inspiration to all.

Michael was also instrumental in establishing the Journal "*Paediatric Surgery International*". He and the late Prof. Alois Scharli realized that there was only one Journal in our speciality in the English language and that there was a need for another journal. They founded the Paediatric Surgery International in 1986, which is now the second most prestigious journal in our specialty and has seen an increase in impact factor every year for the past several years. This has been a remarkable contribution which has benefited paediatric surgeons worldwide, both in the developed and the developing world.

Michael was always interested in research and had a very inquiring mind. In the late 1980's, on realising that there was no forum for young paediatric surgeons to present their laboratory and experimental research, Michael and I established an International Board of Paediatric Surgical Research. This was the first forum solely devoted to young paediatric surgeons to present their laboratory and experimental research. The main objective of the International Board of Paediatric Surgical Research was to organise an International Symposium on Paediatric Surgical Research (ISPSR), bringing together investigators who, through an annual meeting, would contribute to the progress of research in paediatric surgery. Over the years, the ISPSR has become a global research forum presenting high quality research in our speciality. This year is the 37th International Symposium on Paediatric Surgical Research and it will take place at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden from 19-21 September, 2024.

Michael always enjoyed mixing the things he loved in life with his professional career. A wonderful example of this was the development of the Paediatric Surgical Week in the ski resort, Kühtai, Austria. It began in the year 2000, when he invited 20 eminent paediatric

surgeons from all parts of the world to gather in Kühtai for a week. It provided a wonderful opportunity for paediatric surgeons, both through the formal sessions and especially through the informal gatherings to develop links and collaborations with others in clinical networking and basic science research.

His extraordinary ability as a leader in our specialty was recognised by many awards and honours. He was the Founding President of the European Pediatric Surgeons Association (EUPSA), President of the Austrian Association of Pediatric Surgeons and Austrian Committee of Accident Prevention in Childhood. He received several medals for outstanding contribution to Pediatric Surgery including the Great Honorary Medal of Gold of the Styrian Government and the Styrian Award for the rights of Children. Michael received the Kafka Medal of the Czech Association of Pediatric Surgeons, the Rehbein Medal from the EUPSA, the Denis Brown Gold Medal from the British Association of Pediatric Surgeons, the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Indian Association of Pediatric Surgeons, and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the World Federation of Pediatric Surgical Associations. Many surgical organisations around the world have bestowed Honorary Membership on Michael. To name a few; he was the Honorary Member of the Baltic, Czech, German, Hungarian, Indian, and Swiss Associations of Paediatric Surgeons.

Michael's research interests included gastro-esophageal reflux in children and short bowel syndrome and accident prevention in children. He published over 230 articles in peer-reviewed Journals and over 40 chapters in Pediatric Surgical Textbooks. He was the Co-editor of four Pediatric Surgical Books including the widely acclaimed Pediatric Surgery (Springer Surgery Atlas Series).

Michael is survived by his partner Christa, wife of many years Susan, sons Tobias, Florian and Stefan, daughters-in-law Sigrid, Karin and Bettina, and grandchildren Julia, Fabian, Benjamin, Lilian and Julian.

Michael was a remarkable paediatric surgeon and visionary leader in our specialty. He was an inspirational and unique person. He meant so much to so many paediatric surgeons not only for the remarkable contributions he made to our speciality but for his love of meeting paediatric surgeons from all over the world, talking to them and listening to their views. He was a remarkable person who will always be remembered with fondness and gratitude by all who knew him personally.

For me personally, it was a privilege to have this extraordinary person as my close friend for 49 years. I have the fondest memories of our visits together over the years to various parts of the world.

Michael, I will miss you. May you rest in peace.

Prem Puri
University College Dublin, Ireland