

Prof. Jiří Šonka, MD., DSc. has died

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Figure 1 – Professor Jiří Šonka MD., DSc., was born on December 28, 1920, died on March 9, 2005 March 9, 2005.

The early spring of 2005 has been marked by the close of the long and prolific life of prominent Charles University and First Faculty of Medicine scientist and educationalist, professor MUDr. Jiří Šonka, DrSc. Professor Šonka was one of our faculty's most important personalities in the last century – he was one of the few truly top endocrinology, metabolic diseases and nutrition specialists.

He worked at the 3rd Clinic of Internal Medicine of the Medical Faculty of Charles University for more than 50 years.

The pentose cycle, the importance of dehydroepiandrosterone, and the foundation of clinical and practical obesitology in the Czech Republic – that was, briefly, the content of the professional life of professor Jiří Šonka, whose life's

work came to an end on March 9, 2005, after a protracted illness.

Jiří Šonka was born on December 28, 1920 into a middle-class family (his father was an owner of a delicatessen shop). He attended a primary French-language school, later a French-language grammar school, from which he graduated in 1939. During the WW2 German occupation he worked at a pharmaceutical plant and, in the last three years of the war, at prof. Šikl's institute of pathology and at the medical department of the hospital of the Elizabethan nuns. He was one of the first post-war students to graduate from the Medical Faculty in the beginning of 1947 and, after a year and a half as house officer at the surgical and internal department of the hospital in Most; he was recruited, on July 1, 1948, by the 3rd Clinic of Internal Medicine headed by prof. Charvát. He remained faithful to this clinic until his final retirement on December 12, 1999! He attended his outpatient clinic regularly until the age of 79.

Since the very beginning, clinical biochemistry became his main interest. In 1955 he started to study the issue of the pentose cycle, from the point of view of its significance both in radiobiology and in obesity. This was also the topic of his candidate thesis, which he defended in 1958, and of his doctoral dissertation (1964). He deserves credit for the transformation of the Third Clinic of Internal Medicine into the form it has until this day. Professor Charvát also put him in charge of the development and equipment policy of the clinic. In the difficult circumstances of the 1950s it seemed that professor Charvát would not be able to resist the pressure from ruling Communist Party bodies to dismiss his honest and gentle assistant physician Jiří Šonka. The latter managed to hold on to his job

thanks to his interest in radiation sickness and participation in military-supported research, but he was not allowed to teach students. In 1967 he received the State Award for research into the importance of the pentose cycle in pathophysiology and the treatment of radiation sickness. By that time he was already a fully certified internal medicine researcher at the Laboratory for Endocrinology and Metabolism with an associate professor degree (1966). The topic of his dissertation reflects prof. Šonka's second lifelong interest – obesity. He moved from scientific work in the area of energy metabolism, especially the question of adaptation to a reduced food intake, to very practical applications – he introduced institution-based therapeutic stays involving special regimes for obese patients, connected with reduction diets, in the town of Zbiroh and later, for many years, in Roudnice nad Labem; he also spent time assessing trade-union recreational programmes and proposed new, scientifically founded regimes. He established and headed the outpatient obesitological department at the clinic and, in the 1990s, supported the establishment of an independent Czech Obesitology Society, of which he was later elected honorary president.

The scientific work of prof. Šonka is reflected in more than 350 publications (about one half in foreign countries), including especially his monograph “Pentoses” (Pentosy. Chemie, fysiologie a klinika, Prague 1956) and a number of globally cited works on dehydroepiandrosterone, which he studied two decades before it started enjoying a boom in the 1980s. His monograph on this hormone is still important. The work on radiobiology, which he did for military research, was declassified in the 1970s. His expertise was so indispensable in this area that he was allowed to stay at the clinic throughout the 1960s and 1970s in spite of not being politically reliable enough in the view of the ruling Party. Regardless of his amazing scientific achievements he was not nominated for a professorship until 1989; the appointing procedure did not take place until the beginning of the 1990s.

We became personally acquainted with professor Šonka in the first half of the 1980s when he was head of a smoothly working metabolic laboratory that employed three undergraduates and several technicians; radiobiological research was ending in those days and professor Šonka devoted himself fully to the metabolic aspects of obesity. The 1980s also witnessed the start of hospital-wide workshops that attracted the group of doc. Hainer, doctor Málková and several psychiatrists to obesitology. Prof. Šonka had a rather dry sense of humor, which helped him get along with his numerous, mostly female clients. His Friday outpatient clinic for the obese would end late in the afternoon and in the summer months he would spend whole weeks with his obese patients in Roudnice. He was a tireless educator in the field of obesity prevention and is until this day known to several generations of readers of women's magazines. He had problems with his own digestion and his thin figure was at times the target of the remarks of his less successful patients – one of them is supposed to have said that “rather than look like the professor it was better to remain fat!” Secretly, during the totalitarian

regime and later, in the 1990s, publicly, he continued in the Charvátian tradition of membership in the Mason Lodge, where he was raised to the highest position. All the aspects of the concealed as well as public life of professor Šonka was brought up in a pleasant interview that was part of the “I Am Still Here” TV series recorded at the end of the 1990s, just before the outbreak of his last, several years lasting illness.

At any time of his life, professor Šonka could rely on his family, which provided the so much needed support in his last years. Together with his wife, originally a laboratory technician working for doc. Šilink at the Endocrinological Institute and later assistant at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, they brought up a son, Karel, who is now a professor of neurology at the First Faculty of Medicine, and a daughter Klára, who graduated from the Department of Roman Languages and Literature, married a Frenchman and lives now in France. With the departure of professor Šonka, Czech medical science has lost one of the representatives of the scientific glory of Charvát’s classical Third Clinic of Internal Medicine, who proved by his personal example that it was possible to both engage in top research and simultaneously benefit a large number of patients by doing practical clinical work.