

Obituary. In memory of Erik Thorsby (1938-2021).



With sadness we received the message that our good friend and colleague Erik Thorsby has passed away. Erik was one of the pioneers, who made several important contributions to the field of histocompatibility and immunogenetics.

Short summary of his scientific work

Erik started his professional career in 1966 at the Ullevaal Hospital in Oslo, Norway. At that time kidney transplantation had just started in Scandinavia and Erik became very much interested in histocompatibility and the role of HLA matching in renal transplantation. His studies revealed several new HLA antigens and, in collaboration with Fleming Kissmeyer-Nielsen, he provided in 1970 convincing evidence for the existence of a third HLA locus, HLA-C[1]. Erik became one of the initiators and the histocompatibility expert of ScandiTransplant [2], which had its 50 years anniversary in 2019. Originally, organ allocation was based on matching for HLA-A and -B. However, when the MLR determinants could be determined with serology, Erik was one of the first to demonstrate a strong effect of HLA-DR matching on graft survival, resulting in a publication in the Lancet in 1978 [3]. Erik was also an authority in research on HLA and disease associations with a special interest in coeliac disease[4] and type 1 diabetes[5]. His group made several crucial findings, not only by showing an association between DQ2 and coeliac disease[6] but also by revealing important aspects of the immune reactions involved such as the presentation of modified gliadin epitopes to the T cell receptor[7]. Erik also had great interest in population genetics and in particular in the migration patterns of different ethnic groups all over the world. His favorite story concerned the population of Eastern Island, Rapa Nui. Studies on the genetics of mitochondrial DNA and the Y-chromosome had provided evidence that the settlers and ancestors of the current populations were Polynesians coming from the west.

Erik could demonstrate by adding the results of (high resolution) HLA typing to the other 2 parameters that early Amerindians had also contributed to the gene pool.[8]

The research of Erik and his team has led to more than 500 papers in peer reviewed journals.

Other contributions to the field

Erik has always been a very active member of the international immunogenetic community, which is amongst others reflected by the contributions of his laboratory to the International Histocompatibility and Immunogenetics workshops since 1970. Erik was appointed as a workshop councilor in 1975 and has served as such until the last workshop in Asilomar. Erik has served as EFI-president from 2002-2004 and was one of the first teachers during the international summer schools organized by EFI together with the sister organization ASHI and APHIA. In 2006 Erik was one of the organizers of a successful EFI meeting in Oslo. He was very often invited as a speaker on international meetings and was always clearly present as an active contributor to the discussions.

In 2011 he was awarded with the Ceppellini lecture during the EFI meeting in Prague.

Apart from being a brilliant scientist with major contributions to the field of H&I, Erik was also a very pleasant and social person. I remember his informal interactions with the students during the first summer schools. They could hardly believe that the great Erik Thorsby, whom they only knew from the literature, was such a friendly and helpful person. Also, personally, I have very good memories of Erik and will never forget the nice moments we had together, often with a beer. I am very glad that he could be present at my retirement symposium, where, of course, he talked about his favorite Eastern Island and enjoyed the party afterwards.

Although Erik has passed away, his legacy to the field will remain, as is the case with our memories of a very pleasant and knowledgeable colleague and friend.

We wish his wife Anne and further family all strength with this great loss.

Frans Claas

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