

Michael Obladen: Promoter of Clinical, Scientific, and Academic Neonatology in Germany and Europe

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Keywords

Laudation · Michael Obladen · Neonatology

Michael Obladen, MD, PhD (shown in Fig. 1), was born on July 21, 1944 in Würzburg during the turmoils of the Second World War and grew up in Mannheim, together with three younger siblings. He studied medicine and philosophy at the Universities of Würzburg, Frankfurt/Main, and Heidelberg, and received his doctorate in 1969 with an experimental thesis on properties of human erythrocytes. After completing University studies and internships, he trained in pediatrics at the University Children's Hospitals in Heidelberg. From 1975 to 1976, he was a research fellow in the group of Louis Gluck, head of Neonatology at the University of California, San Diego, one of the world's leading scientists in basic surfactant research. Michael Obladen's scientific focus was on the metabolic processes which lead to the development and healing of respiratory distress syndrome and the functional significance of various surfactant phospholipids. After his return to Germany, he worked as a senior physician at the University Children's Hospitals in Heidelberg, Tübingen, and Bochum. In 1986, Michael Obladen was appointed as head of the Department of Neonatology at the Children's Hospital of the Free University of Berlin. Due to fundamental restructuring of Berlin's university and hospital

landscape after the fall of the Wall, he became director of the Department of Neonatology at the Virchow Hospital of the Charité and professor at the Humboldt University from 1995 until his retirement in 2007.

Michael Obladen always had an unmistakable sense for urgent and relevant issues in neonatology. This is reflected in his diverse and extensive scientific activity, of which the following themes are particularly noteworthy: studies on neonatal respiratory distress syndrome, surfactant deficiency, and surfactant substitution [1–4], oxygen transport of the fetus and newborn, and of iatrogenic blood loss in the neonatal intensive care unit [5]. He organized and led four European multicenter trials on the prevention and treatment of the anemia of prematurity with recombinant human erythropoietin [6]. After surfactant substitution had significantly reduced neonatal mortality, disability-free survival became the focus of intensive care efforts by protecting the immature brain of newborns from damage [7].

A particular concern of him has always been quality improvement and quality assurance in perinatal medicine. He was a member of various quality assurance committees on regional and national levels, and he was one of the pioneers in setting up and structuring intensive care units in Germany that were specifically geared to the needs of newborns. Michael Obladen has been a driving force behind the introduction of neonatology as a subspecialty of pediatrics in Germany and the harmonization of training in neonatology at the European level [8].

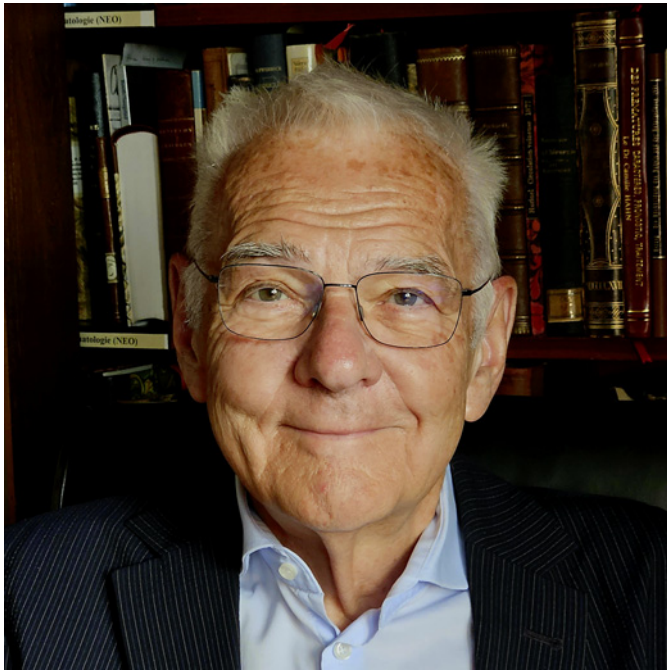


Fig. 1. Professor Michael Obladen.

At the beginning of the 1980s, infant mortality in the Federal Republic of Germany was higher than in many other European countries. Michael Obladen identified the decentralization of high-risk births in Germany as an important risk factor: Postnatal transport of premature and seriously ill full-term babies was commonplace and led to hypothermia and acidosis in many. Despite considerable professional and political resistance, he campaigned throughout his entire career, first in Berlin and later throughout Germany, for the establishment of perinatal centers and for the centralization of care for pregnant women and newborns at increased risk. Even if this development is not yet complete, the decline in newborn mortality and infant mortality in Germany with increasing regionalization proves him right.

His broad and successful scientific work is reflected in over 250 publications listed in PubMed. He is also the author and editor of numerous monographs and book chapters. Michael Obladen is co-founder of the first German-language textbook of neonatal intensive care and has been the editor of this standard work for more than 45 years, now in its 10th edition and translated in several languages.

For over 50 years, Michael Obladen has collected and evaluated historical documents about the cultural and medical history of newborns in medical records, archives, libraries and churches. Over the years, this has resulted in

many original publications [9]. In the recently published book “Oxford Textbook of The Newborn: A Cultural and Medical History,” he has comprehensively presented the history and fate of the newborn and infant in medicine and society and showed the technical, medical, social, and political conditions that influence their living conditions [10].

Based on his studies of philosophy, Michael Obladen always attached great importance to ethical aspects in his clinical work, especially human dignity at the beginning and ending of human life. His approach, which he also passed on to his team members, was based on the ancient principle “primum non nocere” and the strategy “if in doubt, don’t do it.” In order to meet the special physiological needs of the smallest patients, he practiced and taught the principles of evidence-based treatment long before Cochrane reviews were created and published.

Michael Obladen is teacher, motivator, and mentor for numerous young scientists and clinicians who later took leading positions and further pursued his ideas and concepts. He has a national and international reputation. He was President of the German “Society for Neonatology and Pediatric Intensive Care” (GNPI), of which he is an honorary member since 2007. He was awarded the highest honor of the “German Society for Perinatal Medicine” (DGPM), the *Maternité Prize*. He was and is a much sought-after and valued speaker at national and international conferences due to his excellent didactic skills, his broad background knowledge and his general education that goes far beyond medical issues.

In addition to his extensive scientific, clinical and academic tasks, Michael Obladen always managed to pursue his hobbies such as traveling, skiing, rowing, diving, and cooking. He loves music, especially from the Baroque period, and actively plays the harpsichord in a chamber music circle.

Michael Obladen is characterized by extremely hard work, perfect organization and great leadership skills with a high level of professional competence. He is an outstanding clinician, scientist, and teacher who helped establish neonatology as an independent speciality in Germany and developed it far beyond. His professional path was research-oriented, but always close to the patient, his needs and his environment. He can rightly be described as a humanist and scholar with a very broad general knowledge and understanding that extends far beyond his professional field.

Statement of Ethics

No ethical issues are affected in this article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Author Contributions

Draft of the manuscript: R.F.M. Revision of the manuscript: C.P.S.

Funding Sources

No funding.

Data Availability Statement

No scientific data are included in this article.

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