Professor Tage Kemp

28.8.1896-7.1.1964

The leader of The University Institute of Human Genetics in Copenhagen, Professor Tage Kemp, M.D., died on 7 January 1964 after a serious illness lasting for several years. Medical genetic research has thus lost one of its pioneers.

Tage Kemp obtained his medical qualification in 1921. After some years of clinical education, he was appointed scientific assistant to The University Institute of General Pathology in Copenhagen in November 1923 where he remained until he was appointed to the leadership of the newly formed University Institute of Human Genetics and Eugenics in 1938. In 1941, he became director of the Institute and, in 1948, Professor in Human Genetics and Eugenics in The Faculty of Medicine at Copenhagen University. He held this chair until September 1963 when he was forced to retire on account of ill health.

Tage Kemp”’s appointment in The University Institute of General Pathology under Professor Oluf Thomsen proved to be of decisive significance for all of his scientific contributions. Professor Thomsen ‘s great interest in the basic biological problems was reflected in the very extensive fields of research of the Institute which included, in addition to bacteriology, research on blood typing, tissue culture experiments, endocrinology and research on heredity. In his scientific research, Tage Kemp came into close contact with all these aspects of biology. His primary interests were in endocrinology and, as early as 1927, he concluded the thesis for his doctorate, “Studies on foetal sexual characteristics”. In 1934, together with Harald Okkels, he published a textbook in endocrinology which long remained a standard work in this special field, and was also published in German in 1936.

At an early stage, Tage Kemp had, in addition, commenced his studies on the human chromosome count which were based upon analyses of cells from tissue culture employing Carrel’s technique which Albert Fischer had introduced to the Institute after his return from a travelling fellowship in 1922. Kemp must be accredited as being the first to realise the possibilities of employing cultured human tissue for chromosome studies, a method which was revived again with considerable success in modern cytogenic research work at the conclusion of the nineteen fifties. Kemp’s cytogenic investigations were primarily directed towards determining the human chromosome count and the study of mitoses under the influence of ionizing rays and other mutagens.

Kemp began early to establish contact between the clinical subjects and theoretical genetics and, in 1932, he published his first systematic, medical genetic investigations. His interest in eugenics was reflected in a series of later reviews and dissertations until The Galton Lecture in 1957. In his attitude to eugenic problems, which were the subject of very heated debate in the thirties, Kemp successfully determined a well-considered programme. His main object was that eugenics should be included as an integrated part of prophylactic medicine parallel to prophylaxis against
diseases of, for example, infections origin. He strongly emphasized the necessity of medical genetic research as the basis of eugenic measures and this became one of the most important arguments for the institution of a teaching appointment in, and an institute for, the study of human genetics and eugenics under The Faculty of Medicine. With the assistance of the Rockefeller Foundation, necessary funds were obtained for the foundation, and partly also for the maintenance, of such an institute which was inaugurated on 14 October 1938 with Tage Kemp as the leader.

The tasks of the institute were not merely research and teaching but also an extensive consultative activity in view of practical eugenic measures such as were involved in the newly introduced Danish law on access to termination of pregnancy (of 1937). One nucleus of this work was the genetic register which was established in co-operation with hospital departments and research institutes. This register which, after the lapse of only a few years, comprised approximately 50,000 individuals, was considered quite unique at that time and contributed greatly to the establishment of the very special position of the institute. This was further confirmed by the intense research which was rapidly carried out in the institute under Tage Kemp’s inspiring leadership. Kemp soon had a series of young doctors with special qualifications attached to the institute where, under his supervision, comprehensive medical genetic familial and population investigations were undertaken resulting in no less than 25 doctorates in the course of approximately the first decade. Many of these theses were of excellent quality and they are frequently quoted in genetic literature today.

This contributed to the fact that foreign funds were placed at the disposal of the institute to a very considerable extent and it was no mere chance that The First International Congress in Human Genetics was held in Copenhagen in 1956 on Tage Kemp’s initiative and with him as president. As the leader of a research institute, Tage Kemp was characterized by his very liberal attitude towards his co-workers to whom he gave great freedom so that, without unnecessary interference, they were able to employ their special interests in the subject as initiative. This was combined with great willingness to assist, if required.

In the course of years, Tage Kemp received many honours both in Denmark and abroad. For a long period, Professor Kemp undertook annual lecture tours both in Europe and America; he was invited not only to the older centres of human genetics where he had studied in his youth but also to newer laboratories now being erected elsewhere in the world with the Institute in Copenhagen as model.

Tage Kemp’s personality was dominated by his modest and occasionally somewhat reserved nature. This concealed a surprisingly stubborn tenacity which was responsible for the fact that he could most frequently fulfill his numerous constructive plans despite all the difficulties involved. He freely acknowledged the incomparable support he received throughout his life from his wife, Eva Kemp, who contributed so much to the harmonious background without which Professor Kemp’s indefatigable external contribution would scarcely have been possible.

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