

# Henri Begleiter—In Memoriam

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The field of alcoholism has suffered a major loss with the recent death of our luminary friend and colleague, Dr. Henri Begleiter. He was one of the truly great, wise, and charismatic leaders in the field of alcoholism, who possessed a unique combination of professional and personal gifts.

With his rare encyclopedic knowledge in multiple fields, and his remarkable intellectual acumen, he almost single-handedly created a field of investigation that brought together the disciplines of neurophysiology, alcoholism, and ultimately genetics. Henri possessed a forceful, charismatic, and extraordinary personality; his warmth, charm, vitality, gregariousness, and infectious enthusiasm transcended everything that he did. He lived each day fully and did not pursue any undertaking that he was not fully committed to. Although he was extremely intense in pursuing his goals, he was equally passionate about enjoying life.

Henri's unique perspective on life was colored by his early childhood in France, having survived the war as a "hidden child" in a monastery in the mountains of the Massif Central. Although this traumatic experience at an early age could have adversely distorted his perspective on life, on the contrary, it only served to strengthen his character, and his will power, and above all, his *joie de vivre*. With his enormous drive to succeed even in the face of adversity, Henri immigrated to the United States as an exchange student and stayed on to live out the American dream.

Henri Begleiter founded and headed the world-renowned Neurodynamics Laboratory at Downstate Medical Center, dedicated to cutting-edge research in brain dynamics, which has attracted residents, doctors, scientists, and postdoctoral fellows from all over the world, each of whom have been inspired by his contagious enthusiasm for research, to make his or her own contributions to the field.

I am honored to have had Henri as a mentor and to have collaborated with him since the beginning of my career, when there was no unified field of neuroscience. I have watched with awe over the years, as he passionately

and single-mindedly held to his scientific vision, always a step ahead of everyone else. Working with Henri was always exciting, fast-paced, provocative, and challenging. The energy and exuberance that Henri brought to any discussion is as irreplaceable as his witty set of jokes that he would use as a parting shot. He made it all such fun!

A devoted and inspirational mentor to so many of us, Henri challenged each of us to do better to reach his high standards of excellence. He led by example and wanted all those who crossed his path to grow, not by imitation, but by innovation.

Henri was an original thinker who was always excited by big new ideas. He would come up with novel ways to look at any problem—something we were not even considering at all, that would send our discussions in entirely new directions altogether! All of us who attended his weekly lab meetings were always astonished by his scientific instincts and personally experienced "Eureka moments" on many occasions when we discussed any topic with Henri.

Henri's style of leadership was not to micromanage, but to inspire us and leave us to work out the details. His provocative approach is summed up by this quote from Albert Einstein, a quote that he sent some of us after his last lab meeting, about a week before he died: "If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it."

Henri's research path has manifested an incredible vision—progressing from early animal and human work studying underlying brain hyperexcitability related to alcoholism, to subsequent findings demonstrating that this brain excitability is critically involved in the genetic predisposition toward the development of alcoholism, substance abuse, conduct disorder, and antisocial personality disorder—an amalgam of disorders now known as externalizing disorders.

The highlights of Henri's career include the groundbreaking finding published in *Science* that some neurophysiological anomalies in alcoholics were already present in their young offspring before any exposure to alcohol and drugs. These seminal findings led Henri to propose a model that changed the thinking in the field: namely, that rather than being a consequence of alcoholism, this underlying neural hyperexcitability was a predisposing factor leading to the development of alcoholism and related disorders. This innovative study was replicated throughout the world and launched him on a systematic search to elucidate the genetic vulnerability underlying a predisposition toward alcoholism and related disorders.

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Over 17 years ago, with his foresight and charismatic leadership, Henri was instrumental in assembling scientists in various domains to organize the large collaborative study focused on the genetics of alcoholism—COGA, which he has led since its inception. Under his leadership, with a strong emphasis on novel approaches such as using brain oscillations as endophenotypes, COGA has successfully identified several genes involved in the predisposition to develop alcoholism and related disorders, and this approach is still state-of-the-art today.

I am very pleased that Henri was able to culminate his distinguished career by being awarded a distinguished professorship just weeks before he died, a title he so genuinely deserved as an academician and scientific researcher.

Owing to his inspirational leadership, we have renamed the laboratory that he founded and headed the Henri Begleiter Neurodynamics Laboratory in his honor.

Inspired by his passion, and guided by his vision, we will continue on the path that Henri envisioned, continuing to make the Henri Begleiter Neurodynamics Laboratory a leading center of innovative research excellence that Henri would be proud of, so that his contributions will be fully realized.

On a more personal note, we will all deeply miss Henri's sense of humor, his warmth, vitality, exuberance, and charismatic presence that touched us all. We will all miss him increasingly in the days, months, and years to come . . . in ways we may not be able to anticipate or understand today. We were all so fortunate and privileged to have known and been inspired by him, and we will cherish our memories of him dearly. Henri will always be among us—his original ideas, unforgettable magnetic personality, and dominating presence will continue to influence our thinking each and every day.