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Obituary for Professor Dr. Dr. h.c. Norbert Victor (1940–2011)

Professor Dr. rer. nat. Dr. h.c. Norbert Victor, elected member of the International Statistical Institute (ISI), former president of the International Association for Statistical Computing (IASC), the International Society of Clinical Biostatistics (ISCB), the Gesellschaft für Medizinische Informatik, Biometrie und Epidemiology (GMDS) in Germany and former Director and Professor emeritus of the Institute of Medical Biometry and Informatics of the University Heidelberg (IMBI) passed away on April 18th, 2011 in his home in Wilhelmsfeld near Heidelberg only a few months after his 70th birthday.

The following lines in memory of Norbert Victor intend to pay homage to an outstanding scientist, scholar, teacher and science manager working at the interfaces between statistics and biomedicine, and between statistics and computation at the same time admirably combined. Prof. Victor has been coeditor of the Special Issue on "Computational Statistics within Clinical Research" in 2009 (Edler et al., 2009) and therefore the editors of this second issue as well as the editorial board of CSDA conceived this homage to remember and honor him and his work. This author is fully aware of that it is impossible to do full justice to a man's long life devoted to statistical science and its applications in medicine. Consequently, this summary will necessarily be a selective description of a scientist's work and achievements. Nevertheless the present issue seems to be an excellent place to remember Norbert Victor at an outstanding time for the Journal of Computational Statistics and Data Analysis (CSDA), which without him may never have become what it is now. Major stages of his scientific life will be mentioned, outstanding fields imprinted by him will be highlighted, and a summary will be given in the form of a generic Curriculum Vitae and a bibliography, all according to the best of available knowledge.

1. Stages at the Interfaces between Statistics, Computation and Life Sciences

Mainz to Munich: From Mathematics to Computational Statistics

Norbert Victor, born in Mainz (Germany) on 8 December 1940 was educated at the humanistic Rhabanus Maurus Gymnasium in Mainz, which he completed with the Abitur in 1960 for general university entrance. From 1960 to 1966 he studied

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Mathematics at the Johannes-Gutenberg University of Mainz, with a stipend for some time at the University of Grenoble (France), graduating in 1966 from the Department of Mathematics of the University of Mainz.

Picture 1. Norbert Victor in 1972 working on his PhD thesis after having earned the diploma degree (Dipl.-Math.) in mathematics.

Having obtained this diploma degree he joined the Institute of Medical Statistics of the Johannes-Gutenberg University as Associate Research Scientist (Wissenschaftlicher Assistent) from 1966–1969, and earned there in 1970 the degree of PhD (Dr. rer. nat.), writing a thesis on the analysis of multidimensional contingency tables. Thereafter, Norbert Victor changed location from Mainz to Munich, as well as type of institution, when he joined the Gesellschaft für Strahlenforschung (GSF, Society for Radiation Research) in Munich, a German federal research center. From 1970–1972 he headed the Statistics Unit of the Institute of Medical Data Processing at the GSF where he worked also on his habilitation (the highest academic qualification that a scholar can achieve by his own pursuit in several European and Asian countries).

Although brief, this was a highly productive period with the freedom to develop his vision of applying statistics using the emerging computational tools. He took the chance to develop many innovative ideas which later came to succeed. Obviously. this has been the starting point of his career in computational statistics, a field discovered to be exploited for medical statistics, later known as Medical Informatics, and which he never left even when his major scientific and management interests turned to life sciences, which then became a major focus of his life.

Munich to Giessen: Soft Collision of Computational Statistics with Clinical Research

One should recall that the period of the second half of the sixth decade of the last century was one where different intellectual and societal streams became confluent in Germany, and created an atmosphere of break-through for more democracy, higher and unbiased education, and strengthened science. It was the political arena of Willy Brandt where the universities not only grew faster and new universities were established, but also the time where new topics became welcome. Statistics was a field that slowly recovered after the devastation of the Nazi regime, and it was a time when computational methods were recognized as promising tools and when concepts for use in applied research were broadly discussed, see e.g. Victor (1973), also Victor (1984). In that period he received in 1972 a professorship of Biomathematics at the Justus Liebig University of Gießen, and became Director of the Department of Biomathematics in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. During a period of 12 years working on statistical methodology and the development of statistical analysis systems he came into contact with clinical researchers at the University of Gießen influencing his future scientific work and career. Besides his standard academic duties, he developed basic concepts of the conduct and management of clinical trials. Outstanding from that period of methodological work for clinical research are his activities for the design of lung cancer trials, which has set standards for future clinical trials methodology in Germany. Norbert Victor's methodological work was characterized by accurateness and intuition, but at the same time heading straight for the real scientific goal and the content of the research question defined by life sciences and, in particular, by medicine. At the same time, he continued work on statistical data analysis systems and computational statistics (see below).