

Obituary - Professor Mogens Schou

One of the giants of the world of bipolar disorders has died.

Professor Mogens Schou, the man whose groundbreaking research into Lithium led to its utilization as a first treatment for bipolar illness, died on September 29th, 2005. His work ultimately benefited hundreds of thousands of patients, worldwide, saving lives and securing futures. He was 87 years old.

His list of awards and accomplishments was extraordinary. The author of more than 500 publications, including texts, research papers, articles and book chapters, he had enormous influence on the direction of research for bipolar illness. Emeritus Professor of the Psychiatric Hospital in Risskov, Denmark, he was awarded many honours, including an honorary doctorate from Charles University in Prague, the oldest medical school in central Europe. In recognition of his accomplishments in bipolar medicine, he was made the honorary President of the International Society for Bipolar Disorders. At the same time, the Mogens Schou awards were created for presentation at the Society's biennial International Conference on Bipolar Disorder.

In the early 1950's, encouraged by early research by Dr. John Cade of Australia, Dr. Schou used Lithium on an experimental basis with a small number of patients who were in various states of mania. He found that Lithium has a definite anti-manic effect., confirming some of Cade's findings. Despite this, Lithium was not an initial success. The academic community and the pharmaceutical industry had little interest in it, seeing little profit in a naturally occurring mineral salt that had been around for thousands of years. In the first fifteen years of its use, it generated very little academic attention; less than 20 papers. In contrast, the drug chlorpromazine generated about 10,000 research papers during its first fifteen years of use. However, the biggest challenge to Lithium was its early abuse when used as a substitute for table salt, and its history of misuse in dealing with gout, kidney stones and rheumatism. Schou's work proved that Lithium, when properly used and monitored, could be successful in treating bipolar mania. It has remained in the first line of treatment for our disorder for forty years.

A number of years ago, I had the extraordinary pleasure of spending an evening with Dr. Schou. Despite being very senior in years, he was an engaging man, hosting a table of friends and acquaintances at the gala dinner for the International Bipolar Disorders Conference in Pittsburgh. One of the most memorable moments of the evening came when he stood before a packed audience of some of the leading psychiatric minds on the planet. Wearing an old jacket and a tired-looking woolly sweater, he discoursed on his lifetime of adventures with Lithium, stating at one point that he *'had no idea why it really worked'*, to the huge amusement of his audience. At another point in his speech he described Manic-Depressive illness as, in his words, *'the national illness of Denmark'*. A little-known fact about Professor Schou was that his brother had suffered from manic-depressive illness.

In the words of Dr. Samel Gershon, a past president of the International Society for Bipolar Disorders, "...Although his contribution to the field will leave a permanent and lasting legacy, the loss of his humanity and personal commitment to science and patient care are irreplaceable".