

Professor Wolfgang Steiner

(1942–2024)

BY DAVID JOHN HOWARD

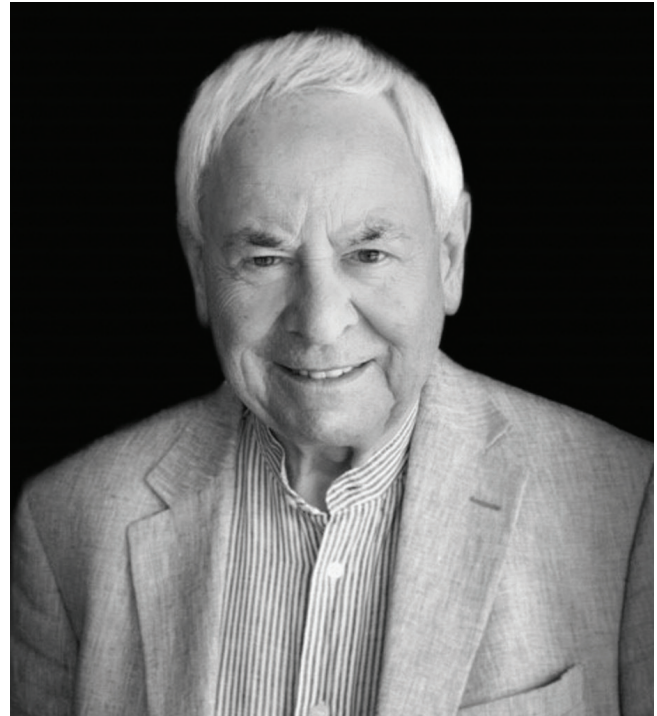
It is with great sadness that we must inform all our readers of the passing of the wonderful Professor Dr Wolfgang Steiner, the truly indomitable, passionate Professor of Otolaryngology of the Medical Faculty of Gottingen, Germany, from 1986–2007. Wolfgang died on 5 February 2024 at the age of 81.

He achieved a rare distinction in medicine. He changed the way of thinking of a whole generation of ENT/head and neck oncologists, not just the surgeons, but radiotherapists, pathologists, medical oncologists, anaesthetists and allied specialties such as speech therapy. He promoted a fundamental change in the basic concepts and surgery of upper aerodigestive tract malignant disease, moving us from en-bloc radical tumour surgery to minimally invasive endoscopic laser surgery. A true paradigm shift, a term first described in 1962 by the physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn.

Wolfgang qualified from medical school in Erlangen in 1971 and during his ENT training he became interested in early detection and care of patients with cancer in the oral cavity, pharynx and larynx. He commenced endoscopic CO2 laser surgery for excision of early laryngeal cancer in the University Hospital of Erlangen and his results were written up in his 1978 thesis. He then relentlessly increased the indications for larger tumours as he gained experience. I clearly remember his dynamic lectures and presentations in the 1980s when his pioneering work met with marked resistance at international meetings and at home in Germany – a not unusual response to innovators in the world of medicine!

He was appointed as Professor of Otolaryngology of the Gottingen University Medical Centre in 1986. Wolfgang's numerous national and international lectures and publications, with substantial numbers of patients and long-term follow up, gradually led to acceptance and recognition. He was aided in this quest by the talented Dr Petra Ambrosch, who went on to become the Professor and Head of ENT at the University Medical Centre of Schleswig-Holstein. It was their incredible results in the hypopharynx and oropharynx, in addition to the well-known laryngeal results, that really convinced me about the concept of minimally invasive CO2 laser surgery. I listened to them present this work at EUFOS in 1996. Wolfgang published over 200 national and international publications whilst being a very busy clinician and teacher.

Wolfgang spoke five languages fluently, though he was always modest about this considerable talent, particularly his command of English! His strength of character and determination were truly put to the test in conferences worldwide. He would repeatedly invite his detractors and agnostics to see for themselves in Gottingen. By the time he retired in 2007, no less than 445 guest doctors (many of them senior and heads of departments) from 53 countries had visited Gottingen. I went in 1997 and it was a fascinating and exceptional educational experience, complete with multiple demonstrations in the operating theatre on a wide variety of cases. In this endeavour and in his family life he received phenomenal support from his wife, Grazia, a gracious host, supreme organiser, linguist and artist.

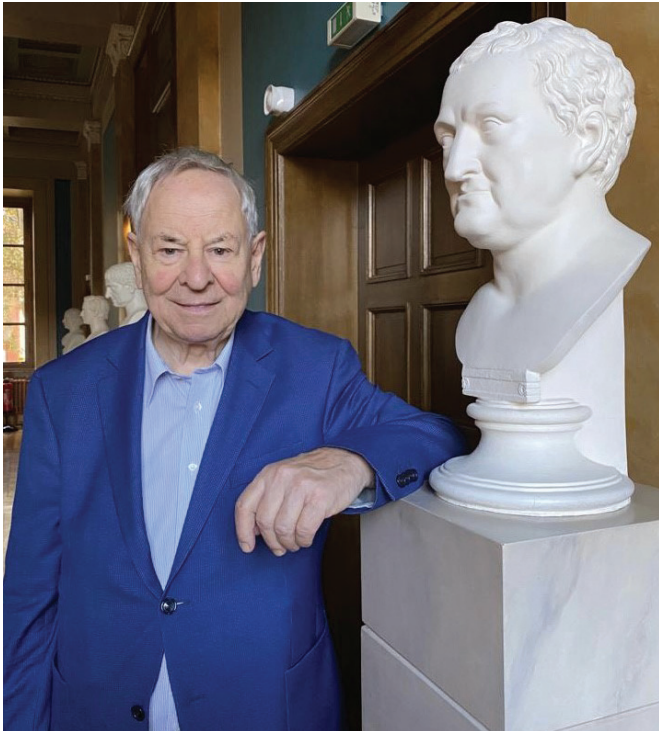


Not content with operating to demonstrate the important principles and technique in Gottingen with his whole team around him, he taught on many international courses and, with Petra, operated in many hospitals. They kindly came to the UK to start our annual trans-oral laser course in 1998 at the Royal National Throat, Nose and Ear hospital in London. Wolfgang was very impressed by my anaesthetic colleagues, but less so by the facilities in our 120-year-old hospital. At one point, after an hour of operating on a particularly difficult case, he leaned back on the operating chair to announce: "This hospital should be in a museum!" Fortunately, the course continues to this day in more modern facilities in Liverpool under the guidance of Professor Terry Jones and his colleagues.

Underneath his sometimes-stern exterior, Wolfgang was a humorous and sympathetic man who genuinely cared passionately about making progress for patients with cancer. His book *Endoscopic Laser Surgery of the Upper Aerodigestive Tract – with Special Emphasis on Cancer Surgery*, written with Petra and published by Thieme in 2000, remains the most instructive text on this powerful advance in head and neck oncology. It is still applicable to the beginner and experienced surgeon.

Eventually, colleagues in Germany and worldwide began to recognise Wolfgang's substantial step forward in oncology and he began to receive many awards from national and international professional societies. The following are just a few examples. In 1997, he received the Ludwig Haymann Prize of the German Society

OBITUARY



Prof Wolfgang Steiner next to the bust of Albrecht von Haller.

for Otorhinolaryngology, Head and Neck Surgery in recognition of his contributions. In 2004, he was the first German laryngologist to be appointed Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. In 2005, he received the German Cancer Prize from the German Cancer Society for his outstanding scientific achievements in the field of clinical cancer research. He was the first ENT doctor to be honoured with this highly prestigious award.

In 2012, he was awarded the Dr Fritz Erler Science Prize for Surgical Medicine from the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen, where he trained originally. Finally, and of great significance, Wolfgang received the Albrecht von Haller Medal, the highest award given by the Medical Faculty at University Medical Centre of Gottingen. Gottingen is one of the world's greatest universities and Albrecht von Haller is considered as one of the founders of modern medicine. Thus, our ENT prophet did obtain honour in his own country.

Wolfgang leaves behind his wonderful wife, Grazia – I hope she has many years of painting ahead of her – and his remarkable international family, Robert and Tina with grandchildren Lola and Luka in South Africa; Christian and Consuela with grandchildren Malena and Carlos in Seville; and Martin and Sandra with grandson Leon in Switzerland.

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