

EASL Recognition Awardee 2009

Prof. Raoul Poupon



It is both an honour and a privilege to introduce Prof. Raoul Poupon on the occasion of the EASL Recognition Award Ceremony 2009. Prof. Poupon is a “Professeur, classe exceptionnelle”, at l’Université Pierre et Marie Curie, and Chef du service hépato-gastroentérologie de l’Hôpital Saint Antoine in Paris.

Raoul Poupon grew up in Brittany, in western France, and was a student of medicine in Rennes and Beaujon hospital in Paris. As an Intern in Hôpital Beaujon, he was once asked to give a presentation on the enterohepatic circulation of bile acids. Probably this was the most important talk of his professional career. Prof. Serge Erlinger, who later was to become his mentor, was in the audience and approached him to join his lab to do experimental work in the field of bile acids. Today, we know that this was the start of a most remarkable clinical and scientific career. Prof. Poupon performed his

first studies on the effect of bile acids on bile formation in experimental animals [1,2], but right from the beginning, he laid down the bridge to the clinic and the patient with liver disease [3], an early example of what is today called a “translational approach”. Fortunately, ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) was among those bile acids he exposed his experimental animals to. And for those who have never worked with UDCA: this mysterious bile acid although differing from the primary human bile acid, chenodeoxycholic acid, only by epimerization of the 7-OH group from an α to a β position has unique biological properties among which those of a posttranscriptional secretagogue and an antiapoptotic agent [4]. This bile acid held the laureate’s attention for the following 30 years.

In 1987, Prof. Poupon and his group published a pilot study on the effect of UDCA on serum liver tests in

15 patients with PBC in the *Lancet* [5] the data of which were supported by a first randomized trial by Dr. Ulrich Leuschner from Frankfurt [6]. In 1991, the Poupon landmark trial on the effect of UDCA treatment in PBC was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* [7]. This paper showed in a large cohort of 146 well-characterized patients with PBC the benefit of UDCA treatment versus placebo for 2 years on serum liver tests among which potent surrogate markers of survival probability like serum bilirubin and on histological features. Together with his wife Renée, an expert epidemiologist and statistician, and his co-workers, Raoul Poupon pursued in studying the long-term consequences of UDCA treatment for his patients. Renée and Raoul Poupon, together with Dr. Jenny Heathcote from Toronto and Dr. Keith Lindor from Rochester were able to show a survival benefit of UDCA treatment in a large Franco-Canadian-American population of almost 550 PBC patients after a follow-up of 4 years for the first time [8]. It took 11 more years until we learned from Prof. Poupon and his group that 3 of 5 PBC patients who respond to UDCA by normalizing serum bilirubin and improving in AP and AST serum activities to lower than 3 and 2 times the upper limit of normal, respectively, have a normal life expectancy of up to 15 years [9], a finding previously suggested in a modified form [10] and most recently convincingly confirmed in an independent cohort [11]. Present efforts are focused on those patients who do not adequately respond while on UDCA and need additional treatment.

To date, Prof. Poupon and his group have published around 370 original articles, reviews and editorials and more than 100 book chapters mainly in the field of cholestatic liver diseases. The translational approach characteristic of his group led to excellent publications both in clinical hepatology and experimental research.

I met Prof. Poupon for the first time in 1987 in Munich, when I had already been infected with the “Urso virus”, and since then many more times. I have enjoyed every single conversation with him and I have always been impressed by his creative thinking, his provocative questions and his deep and pure interest in trying to understand basic mechanisms of unresolved clinical problems in our field. As I am certainly biased and in order to adequately present Prof. Poupon’s major achievements from various perspectives, I have asked his mentor, Prof. Serge Erlinger, his long-term closest colleague and friend Dr. François Ballet, and – we are a European Society – my mentor and expert on the field, Prof. Gustav Paumgartner to provide their view on the following issues: (i) major professional achievement, (ii) most important publication, and (iii) three major personal strengths. Their answers were:

(i) Keeping Hôpital Saint-Antoine as a reference center of Cholestatic liver diseases as under the late

Prof. Caroli (SE), exploration of therapeutic properties of UDCA in PBC (FB, GP);

- (ii) PBC-UDCA trial [7] (FB, GP) and other studies on the effect of UDCA in PBC (GP); LPAC syndrome [12] (SE);
- (iii) Originality, imagination/creativity, perseverance (SE&GP); outstanding clinician and brilliant scientist, extremely original/disruptive way of thinking, 24h commitment to patients, medicine and science; incredible coach/leader/teacher (FB).

Today, creative translational research and successful clinical work is based on teamwork in which every member of the team contributes to her/his best for the benefit of our patients. Prof. Poupon had the enormous talent to form a group in which every member in the meantime has become a recognised and internationally respected expert in the field in his/her own right. Besides his wife Renée, a number of colleagues have contributed to the enormous success of the group, among whom Olivier Chazouilleres, Chantal Housset, Christophe Corpechot, Veronique Barbu, Olivier Rosmorduc, and Nicolas Chignard. We hope for the benefit of our patients that they will continue their inspiring and innovative work for many more years and congratulate Prof. Poupon and his group on the EASL Recognition Award 2009.

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