

**JOURNAL**

of Health Inequalities

## Paths to oncology. The leaders are watching

Renata Furman

Editor-in-Chief "Służba zdrowia", Warsaw, Poland

**ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:** Renata Furman, "Służba zdrowia", 2 Glogera Street, local 5, 02-051 Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: [renata.furman@sluzbazdrowia.pl](mailto:renata.furman@sluzbazdrowia.pl)

"Drogi do onkologii. Liderzy patrzą" ("Paths to oncology. The leaders are watching"), a book published by the medical publisher PZWL in September/October 2017, is comprised of individual stories of contemporary Polish oncologists, told by the doctors themselves. They describe the paths they took to oncology, which was and remains a domain of medical innovation and humanity's fascinating struggle to overcome diseases, cancer being the most complicated disorder with which these heroes of the medical profession wage war.

The list of names included in the book is not, of course, a full index of the outstanding figures in Polish oncology. I hope that in the next publication I will be able to introduce readers to still more names.

The following people are the first I was able to talk with, and I invite the reader to learn about them here:

- Professor Jacek Jassem, head of the Oncology and Radiotherapy Ward and Clinic at the Medical University of Gdańsk, board member of the Polish and European oncology societies;
- Professor Wiesław Jędrzejczak, head of the Haematology, Oncology and Internal Diseases Ward and Clinic at the Medical University of Warsaw, the surgeon to perform the first allogeneic bone marrow transplant in Poland in 1984;
- Professor Maciej Krzakowski, head of the Lung and Chest Cancer Clinic at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute of Oncology in Warsaw, for many years national consultant in the field of clinical oncology;
- Professor Andrzej Kułakowski, Professor Tadeusz Koszarowski's successor in the Surgical Clinic at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute of Oncology in Warsaw, a pioneer in the field of oncological and reconstructive surgery techniques;
- Dr. Janusz Meder, head of the Lymphatic Cancer Clinic's Medical Treatment Ward at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute of Oncology in Warsaw, expert in the field of radiotherapy, president of the Polish Union of Oncologists;

- Professor Marek Nowacki, surgeon oncologist, for many years director of the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute of Oncology in Warsaw;
- Professor Tadeusz Pieńkowski, president of the Polish Breast Cancer Research Society, a board member of the International Senological Society;
- Professor Edward Towpik, creator of the pioneer Reconstructive Surgery Ward in the Head and Neck Cancer Clinic at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute of Oncology in Warsaw;
- Professor Witold Zatoński, full professor of medicine, Doctor of Honoris Causa of the University of Aberdeen (2014). Between the years 1965-1976 biochemist, general practitioner, scientific and didactic fellow at the Medical Academy in Wrocław. From 1979 until 2016 a researcher at the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Institute of Oncology in Warsaw, where he led the Department of Epidemiology and Cancer Prevention and National Cancer Registry. In 1991 he established and has since headed the "Health Promotion" Foundation. The creator of a movement that has led to an extraordinary reduction in the incidence of lung cancer in Poland.

In the stories of the oncologists featured here, told in a detached manner, we learn about their successes and failures, and are provided a frank account of what happened behind the scenes in their lives and professional choices. The reader's attention will no doubt be drawn to the great modesty of each of the book's characters. Outstanding doctors, often pioneers in their field of medicine, tell us about their fortunes, aspirations and achievements – as if discussing some ordinary path of professional development. And yet, when we look at their achievements, we will understand that this book deals with exceptional people, full of passion and healthy ambition, who combine scientific curiosity with a diligence and consistency that distinguish their actions. What's more – by strenuous work, these people were able to contribute to the development of science, while every day fulfilling their mission as doctors, namely helping specific patients.

In their stories, the heroes of this book quote a number of facts and events that are not always closely related to medicine. These provide an interesting background – whether historical or even moral – from times not so far off, but also those more distant. These stories also feature many important names, one of which is repeated in each case, that of Professor Tadeusz Koszarowski, the father of Polish oncology, whose charisma left a mark on the professional lives of each of the characters in the book. I never had the pleasure of meeting the professor personally. That outstanding surgeon, oncologist, organizer of the Polish oncology system and teacher of many generations of doctors, died on August 17<sup>th</sup> 2002, long before I began work on this book. However, memory of the professor is still alive in the reminiscences of his students. Professor Koszarowski continued the work of establishing the Radium Institute in Warsaw which, from its inception in 1932, operated as a medical and scientific research centre. At that time, the Warsaw Institute was one of five Radium Institutes in Europe. It was opened on the initiative of Maria Skłodowska-Curie, who wrote at the beginning of the 1920s: *My greatest dream is the establishment of a Radium Institute in Warsaw*. In 1923, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of radium's discovery, the Polish Committee to Combat Cancer turned to the Polish public with a fundraising appeal for a National endowment for Maria Skłodowska-Curie. The laying of the cornerstone for construction of the Institute took place on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1925, with Skłodowska-Curie attending.

Years later, in 1941, the group of prominent figures of Polish medicine working at the Radium Institute was joined by the then young surgeon Tadeusz Koszarowski. In dramatic wartime conditions, alongside none other than Dr. Leon Manteuffel, he undertook the most difficult procedures. After the war, from 1952 to 1985 he was deputy director and then director of the Institute, which was then called the Polish Oncology Centre. Maintaining not only the healing, but also the scientific research character of the facility was the solution that essentially contributed to the development of Polish oncology.

The authority that Professor Koszarowski enjoyed, and thus his influence on others, are emphasized as undisputed attributes by all who mention the professor. When we trace the professional paths of even a small number of those from this group, when we look at how they fulfil the duties of their extremely difficult profession, we can confidently say: they all devolved from him. Even if their careers were not directly “forged” by the professor, they all continue to uphold the values that he instilled in Polish medicine, and in particular Polish oncology: conscientious research work, along with professionalism and humanistic attitudes. The protagonists of this book bring these scientific, medical and general human values to their daily work.

## DISCLOSURE

Author reports no conflict of interest.