
Obituary – Mladen Petrovečki (1960 – 2016)

Recently, with sadness and disbelief, too early we had to say last goodbye to Professor Mladen Petrovečki, MD, PhD. Professor Petrovečki was born in 1960 in Zagreb, Croatia, where he graduated at School of Medicine and made his PhD. He was Full Professor of Medical Informatics at the Department of Medical Informatics at University School of Medicine in Rijeka, and Head of the Immunology Division at the Department of Laboratory Diagnostics, Dubrava University Hospital in Zagreb. Professor Petrovečki was statistical editor and the first Research Integrity editor at the Croatian Medical Journal, statistical consultant for *The Lancet*, *Acta Stomatologica Croatica* and *Biochemia Medica*. Professor Petrovečki was a pivotal person in the field of biomedical statistics, bioinformatics, scientific methodology and research integrity in Croatia, wholeheartedly dedicated to finding and verifying the “final” truth, and continuously seeking the most correct and most accurate ways and methods to achieve it. In doing so, he was always open and available for informal discussions, from which each time anyone could learn a lot and “catch” a missing clue. Fighting with his disease, more than aware of its nature, Mladen continued to carry out his duties steadily and full of enthusiasm, not burdening others with his inner struggle. Professor Petrovečki was a person of wide interests and views, a true polymath. He was Assistant Minister for Science at the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia, and Head of the Working Group for Science and Research Chapter in the negotiating team for the Accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union. Despite his profound commitment to science and publishing, Mladen always found time for trivial things that he enjoyed and which reflected his eternally playful spirit. He was a passionate fan of *Star Trek*, a real “Treky” who could speak “Klingon” language. His other passion was Lego, particularly train construction. He was also fascinated by his mother tongue, the Croatian language. He would find the most suitable word for terms and phrases that were difficult to translate, contributing to the Croatian IT and biomedical terminology. Mladen was strongly inspired by literature; he enjoyed arranging words, playing with semantics and syntax. Besides his many scientific publications, he published a compilation of short stories “Zloduh”, as well as novels. Professor Petrovečki left a wife Vedrana, son Marko and two grandchildren Filip and Laura, who certainly can be proud of him.

Hrvoje Jakovac

Here we present some reflections and a short story about Professor Petrovečki by his colleagues and friends.

Ana Marušić, MD, PhD, University of Split, School of Medicine; EASE president and former Editor of the Croatian Medical Journal:

Most of you will remember Mladen for his passion for statistics. My memories also include his passion for publishing and editing, which ranged from statistical review to publication integrity. In all of his activities related to the Croatian Medical Journal, he was the frontier-man: he was the first statistical editor and its first Research Integrity Editor. Mladen and I collaborated in the translation of our work with authors in the journal to the undergraduate medical curriculum, which resulted in the creation of new courses at our medical schools. Our last joint work was on the Croatian dictionary of common terms in health research and evidence-based medicine. We had memorable, intellectually sparkling and stimulating day-long passionate discussions on how to translate complex terminology. Mladen, I know that you are watching over us, be sure that we will take on your love of things statistical and human.

Lidija Bilic-Zulle, PhD, Rijeka University School of Medicine, former statistical editor at the Croatian Medical Journal and *Biochemia Medica*:

I am forever thankful to Prof. Mladen Petrovečki. For 20 years he was my mentor, teacher, and the best friend, my greatest role model in honesty, science, and professionalism. He selflessly, unreservedly, and patiently passed on his knowledge, friendship, and wisdom to me. His trust, help, support, and understanding were endless and absolute, and he inspires me to improve myself, to work and to be a better person every day. For his loss, my sorrow is unspeakable, but my faith and gratitude for him are a real gift in my life. He was an exceptional man. May his soul rest in Heaven.

Miguel Roig, PhD, St. John's University, New York:

I am profoundly saddened by the loss of my dear friend and colleague, Mladen Petrovečki. Those of us who had the privilege to know him should find comfort in the fact that his memory lives on in the many contributions he made to science. His spirit also lives in the scores of students and colleagues he mentored, as well as in his family and the many friends he had and so dearly loved. May his youthful smile be forever etched in each of our minds.

Srećko Gajović, PhD, Editor in Chief of the Croatian Medical Journal:

During Prof. Petrovečki's decades-long work as a statistical editor at the Croatian Medical Journal, we relied heavily on his judgment and advice. He shared his knowledge with younger colleagues and contributed substantially to the journal's ranking. The work in the journal was only one of his many successful professional activities, and he was always ready to help

with an open heart. Prof. Petrovečki was one of those extraordinary people who changed their surroundings for the better, and for this achievement he should be remembered and thanked.

Hrvoje Brkić, Editor in Chief of *Acta Stomatologica Croatica*:

Croatian biomedical statistics has lost a great man, an expert, a colleague, and a friend. I have known Mladen for 20 full years. In that time, he became my friend and an important external associate of the School of Dental Medicine of the University of Zagreb. He has helped us in editing the scientific journal *Acta Stomatologica Croatica*. He helped us become a part of the CrossCheck project and guided us into the direction of scientific rectitude with which we now publish. He educated our PhD students about the importance of biostatistics and had become an irreplaceable part of our team. Sadly, by leaving us too soon, he has left us with a void which will never be completely filled.

Vedran Katavić, MD, PhD, University of Zagreb, School of Medicine; former Research Integrity editor at the *Croatian Medical Journal*:

I've been Mladen's friend for over 20 years, and in all that time whenever I came to him with a problem I thought was insurmountable, he would always have time for me. He would look at me, make an OK sign with his fingers and say: "Listen, Vedran..." defining the problem as he saw it, followed by at least three possible solutions with increasing levels of difficulty, and an offer to help.

Matko Marušić, MD, PhD, University of Split, School of Medicine; founder of the *Croatian Medical Journal*:

The tracing paper

I have worked with many, many nice people, but I dare to say that Mladen Petrovečki has been one of the nicest among them. His personality united several virtues of which each one alone would suffice for a man to be good for the society. Mladen was especially kind, polite, mellow, educated, and honest, but did have a passion for new ideas, great hopes and hard work, loyalty, articulate expression, and a sense of humour. For those who doubt these words, I will tell a story to prove my judgement. However, inasmuch as the listed merits are not easy to detect (in one unusual story), one should read carefully, and identify them, all of them, there where they lie.

I headed the Laboratory for Immunology in the Central Diagnostic Institute of the Zagreb University Hospital (Zagreb, Croatia), a huge hospital and laboratory encompassing the cellar of a roomy building, and Mladen worked with me. Mladen loved computers, and our colleagues, mostly computer-illiterate, all profited from him, especially when he, after my encouragement

(I love books and publishing), composed a small, clear and easy-to-use handbook to work with the Wordperfect writing software.

Then the war came (1991), the war in which we could choose to do what we knew how to do, or what we liked to do. So, for example, I chose writing and publishing, and Mladen chose – chemistry. He proclaimed that he had always liked chemistry, enquired somewhere, and was assigned to special forces for chemical warfare. At that time and in those war circumstances, this meant that he and his squad would be the first to enter the premises of the Yugoslav Federal Army when the army would withdraw, firstly with a Geiger counter, and later with chemical tests for other dangerous material that could have been left there for our arriving troops. Naturally, the enemy could have set an ambush for those who would enter first, and the squadron members had to carry a handgun. So, we discovered that the nice, polite, mellow Mladen was the first (and only) of us to acquire a military weapon, albeit, if judged by personality, the last to use it. A few of us (men) were a bit jealous, especially me, inasmuch as it became clear that my writing duties would never enable me to acquire a true weapon. Women staff, the majority of our lab, adored Mladen to start with, and – to be honest – with this additional role, liked him even more.

My volunteer engagement brought me to taking testimonies from the personnel of the Vukovar General Hospital after the city fell, and they were released from captivity to arrive in Zagreb as displaced persons. Vukovar fell some three weeks before The Day of Human Rights (December 10). I judged that by that day we could finish the interviews, translate them into English, complete the book design, desk top editing and have the book to present on that very pertinent day. The publisher (also a volunteer) promised to produce 500 copies in a single day – if we brought the print layout in time.

Many of us, including Mladen, translated the interviews into English and we composed the book. The final day Mladen and I had reserved for desk top publishing and printing a mirror image of the text onto special tracing paper for off-print. Both tasks depended on Mladen, while I served as the moral support and kind of comfort guard, because we were aware that we would work long into the night.

Desk top publishing was done in Wordperfect, and all adjustments of the double column pages took a long time. We were both tired, and regarded the printing as an easy job, even relaxating. We went to the main office, to the best computer, where I watched and emitted anxiety especially with respect to the mirror image of the text – which I could not control one more time.

The title page came out of the printer perfect – I immediately checked whether the mirror image letters and rows were straight and complete; they were.

against the dim light and declared that the paper was not good: in the middle it had a straight line; I guessed that the printer was leaking, but Mladen said that this was a wrinkle.

OK, a wrinkle, let us adjust the bunch of paper carefully, and print again. We printed the title page again, and it again had the stupid wrinkle – straight, discrete, but there, along the entire page, and – Mladen worriedly confirmed – it will be printed as a straight line on every page.

We printed again, even some other pages (my idea), and all had the wrinkle. The bundle of paper got thinner, dangerously close to the number of pages we had to print.

Mladen reported that we did not have any reserve paper, because he got it that morning from the central hospital office. There was no chance to reach the office now, after midnight, with all lights turned down but the rare small ones in main hospital halls, all doors locked, with an armed guard who did not know anything about our professional achievements in the realm of clinical bone marrow transplantation and scientific publishing.

We were desperate and I could think of only one thing, and that was calling my wife. So I called, and the phone rang long, and when she answered one could easily tell that I woke her up from a sound sleep. She listened to my story and despair, and carefully, but with a still sleepy voice asked whether we had the heating fan on.

I got angry – it was such an insignificant question – but did not show my disappointment. With the special marital sensors she still recognised my despair and anger and explained with a less sleepy voice:

– The fan may dry the air, and thus the paper. It is possible that aridity makes paper wrinkle in the printer. Turn down the fan. Open the window. If it does not work, try to keep the paper in a humid culture

incubator.

It was too weak, but we had nothing better: we turned down the heating fan and opened the window wide against the thick snow under the moon light. Mladen ran to put part of the paper bundle to the cell culture incubator. It suddenly became very cold and I went to my office to put on my winter coat.

Mladen came back with one paper from the hood to check the print on it. Then he turned the printed paper against the light. There was no wrinkle!

I ran to get more paper from the hood, and we continued printing. With no heating and a wide open window, the room became unbearably cold. I asked him to put on his coat, but he reported that now that we are saved, he needs nothing but the luck that we had enough tracing paper.

We did, almost exactly what we needed – one or two leaflets were left when we finished printing. Mladen packed the print for me, cleaned the desk, turned off the computer and printer and then he started shivering vigorously. I ran for his coat, helped him put it on and hugged him. He hugged me too, maybe to show that the hugging was a celebration, not warming.

– Wait a minute – he asked me while I was about to lock the door. He ran in and disappeared in the dark for a minute or two.

– The ladies love flowers and we have plenty in our offices; this is for Ana, she saved us – he handed me a flower handsomely wrapped in the last, or penultimate, leaf of the tracing paper.

So we published the book in time. Ana loved the flower, and kept the wrapping. Now, as Mladen is not with us, and tracing paper is not anymore used in printing, Ana will find the flower wrapping and we will cherish it all of our lives.



Mladen Petrovečki (1960 – 2016)