In Memorium Jaak Panksepp

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I am sad to say that Jaak Panksepp passed away on April 17, 2017. He had contributed so much to so many fields of application, even to the world of Autism research. He told me in November that he had just learned that he had squamous cell carcinoma.

Jaak was to be a keynote speaker at our conference on Movement and Cognition in Oxford this July, the topic of this Special Issue. He so wanted to come, and four months ago the cancer that he successfully fought before returned and this time he succumbed to it.

Panksepp is the originator of the term, "affective neuroscience," the area of research that examines the neural basis of emotion.

He was born in 1943 in Tartu, Estonia from where he and his family fled in 1944 to escape the advancing Soviet Army. It was that experience that colored his research interest in emotions and how these powerful affective forces can make people do things that they would not have done otherwise. He had always thought that even though human behavior is biologically driven, it does not mean that it is not amenable to change and modification or directed positively.

After several years as displaced persons, his family found a sponsor and moved to the United States. He grew up in Delaware and Lakewood, New Jersey.

Jaak was very much part of the history of the development of the field of 20th Century Psychology.

Among the over 200 papers that he had published, each one a gem, he had argued that playing and thus movement serves a deeper function than simple recreation. He contended that play factors in to optimal brain development. He claimed that playing behavior releases opioids into the brain. He found that the frontal lobe of the brain grows in response to playing behavior. He found that people with autism, who have an overabundance of opioids, have a decreased need for social play. When given opiates, such as morphine, at low levels, play behavior increases. However, when given opioids in large doses, play behavior is sharply decreased, if not deleted altogether. Jaak figured that the opioids released during play acted to stimulate further play; eventually, the opioid level rose to a high enough level satisfy the need to play by inducing a feeling of "social comfort." Autistic children, who detest being touched let alone play, have abnormally large amounts of opioids in their brains.

Jaak was not unaware of tragedy and grief and understood the emotional components of both. His daughter, Tiina Panksepp, died in 1991 when killed by a drunken driver along with three of her friends. Jaak was working on completing his tome Affective Neuroscience when this tragedy occurred. It took him a long time to complete the work and in fact he had been non-productive for quite a while after.

The anguish drove him to further explore its mechanisms—and he did so in guinea pigs and rats.

He was not without social rejection either. Still many today, do not believe his contention that rats and guinea pigs are capable of similar emotions to those of our own.

I am sorry to say that Jaak will not be with us anymore and that we will not be able to hear and talk with him at our conference in July. So here is a reminder of a great man.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65e2qScV_K8

May his memory be a blessing.