

FINAL

A Profile of Dr. Henryk Urbanski, D.Sc., Ph.D.

By Brad Agenbroad and Helen Peynado

Let us begin with two truths and a lie: 1) Dr. Urbanski received his Doctor of Science degree from the University of Edinburgh at the same time that J.K. Rowling received her honorary degree. 2) His Argentinean pre-doctoral student, Dario Lemos, was absent on our first meeting due to his country's 3-0 defeat by Brazil in the American Cup final soccer match. 3) One of his research studies involves the effects of the natural chemical melatonin on seasonal reproduction in humans. Which are the truths and which is the lie? Unfortunately, for Dr. Urbanski and Dario Lemos, option number three is the fib. (Have you ever heard of birthdays occurring in one particular season?!) Having earned the highest scientific degree possible in Great Britain, his celebration was overshadowed by the honorary degree of an internationally famous writer. For Dario Lemos, Argentina's loss was crushing.

In our four-day experience with Dr. Henryk Urbanski, we discovered the answers to these questions through the playfulness of his basic research lab team. Joking and teasing amidst a world of serious scientific inquiry was in abundance. As Dr. Urbanski is awaiting the grant approval addressing his goal to study the affects of DHEA, a natural steroid precursor to testosterone and estrogen, administered at specific times in menopausal monkeys, he is able to focus on his administrative duties as principal investigator. Two towers of paperwork lay upon his desk, including an article written by his pre-doctoral student, a proof for a poster to be used at the Society for Neuroscience

conference in the fall, and a variety of articles from other researchers seeking peer review (hoping to be published in a high impact journal), all awaiting his attention. Yet, with his busy schedule, he eagerly welcomed us into his world and, without delay, explained his research, only stopping to say, “Excuse me for my passion on this subject” and in the same breath continuing to explain the intricacies of the brain.

In accord with the enduring quality of his character, Dr. Urbanski’s career beginnings stemmed from his aspiration to care for animals, which, then led to a focus on the health concerns of non-human primates and the possible implications for humans. There is no doubt about the respect he feels towards the animals he studies with passion. His studies do not typically lead to the termination of his subjects since he focuses on naturally occurring chemicals such as melatonin, which regulates your body’s clock, and DHEA and it’s role in cognition; however, if and when this does occur, it is a rare event and the entire scientific community utilizes every part of the sacrificed animal.

In the short time spent with Dr. Urbanski, our media slanted view of biomedical researchers was altered significantly. Taking a glance around his office quickly revealed his interests in academia and family, mountains and British motorcycles. British motorcycles! The moment the topic of British motorcycles was raised, cued by the large British motorcycle calendar hanging across from his desk, we could see the elation he felt when he discovered that Brad’s brother owns a Norton and a Triumph. The idea that someone might sell him what he desired most possessed him and his immediate reaction was “I’ll even fly up to get it.” My mental image of some crazed mad scientist was transformed, leading to feelings of resentment towards the media for implanting in the minds of viewers the terribly inaccurate images of stoic, anesthetized scientists. His

passions truly went beyond the laboratory. Furthermore, his interactions with his lab team gave continued evidence of his humanity.

In biomedical research, a scientist is hard-pressed to accomplish all tasks of a principal investigator *and* senior scientist; thus, teamwork is essential. Dr. Urbanski's team is composed of a post-doctoral student, several graduate students, and an undergraduate student, all of whom come from various countries around the world. As the senior scientist, he is expected to mentor each student, aiding them in their endeavors towards a scientific career of their own; as a result, he makes an effort to select team members that come from underrepresented and underprivileged backgrounds. For Dr. Urbanski, it isn't about grades or student excellence; it's a matter of providing an opportunity that may not have otherwise been possible. Funding isn't an issue, as he finds some way to provide for each student. The issue is developing excellent scientists. For that reason, he also invites high school teachers and students into his lab, hoping to encourage their pursuits in the field of science. Several times, he requested that we communicate to our students the importance of skills like reading, writing, and organization, but also the importance of artistry and curiosity. Moreover, he asked that we advise disruptive students (who tend to do so because they are bored), to go into the sciences because scientific research is all about curiosity; and, emphasized how important it is to have well rounded skills, because, as a scientist, it's essential to present information in an interesting, artistic way that informs and persuades.

Even with his impressive title, Dr. Henryk Urbanski, D.Sc., Ph.D., Senior Scientist in the Division of Neuroscience at Oregon National Primate Research Center and adjunct professor in the School of Medicine, Physiology & Pharmacology, and

Behavior Neuroscience departments at OHSU (which comes with many requirements in and of themselves), he continued to prove his well-roundedness with his ability to move from the serious topic of the nature of antibodies that reveal neurons through microscopes to joking about the tricks one can play using an MRI scanner and the nature of the semi-colon. Dr. Urbanski further demonstrated the nature of his character with his compassion for his students beyond the lab and acknowledgment of their expertise, always seemingly open, listening, and participating in lively discussions that, of course, included a few jokes here and there.

Overall, the experience was informative as well as entertaining. The depth and breadth of Dr. Urbanski's knowledge paired with his unassuming character was admirable. His willingness to invite people into his world and to contribute to the general knowledge of the public is refreshing and confirms the value of research in the biomedical field.