Dr. Mladen Vranic, OC, OOnt, MD, DSc, FRSC, FRCPC, FCAHS (April 3, 1930 – June 18, 2019)

In 1982, I walked into the office of Mladen Vranic at the University of Toronto as a soon-to-be PhD with absolutely no experience in his area of research, which at that time focused on exercise and metabolism in diabetes. However, I did have a guaranteed post-doctoral fellowship in my hand, as well as some experience that was relevant to Mladen’s long-time interest in extra-pancreatic glucagon. He therefore graciously agreed to take me into his lab as a post-doctoral fellow where I remained for 3 years. During that time, Mladen demonstrated to me the essential qualities that made him an outstanding research supervisor: he encouraged me to follow my dreams; he supported me without hesitation even when he had no idea what avenues I was pursuing; and he never reacted in anger but, indeed, demonstrated both humour and gentle patience even within the chaos that occasionally surrounded him in his very active research lab. Finally, when it came time for me to obtain a faculty position, Mladen generously ‘gave’ me the project on which I had been working, so that it could form the basis of my own independent research laboratory. Without ever preaching, Mladen thus imparted many lessons about being a good graduate supervisor. And he was himself a life-long mentor – training over 50 graduate students and fellows from Canada, the US, Europe and Japan, thereby creating an international legacy through the ongoing research of his many trainees, including (to name but a few): Alan Cherrington (his first PhD student - formerly Chair, Vanderbilt University and President, American Diabetes Association); Diane Finegood (inaugural Director, CIHR Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes); Simon Fisher (currently Chair, University of Utah); Ryuzo Kawamori (his first post-doctoral fellow - formerly Chair, Juntendo University); André Marette (Institute Director, Laval University); Jerry Radziuk (Professor, University of Ottawa); Zhiqing (Jim) Shi (Vice President, REMD Biotherapeutics Inc.); and David Wasserman (Annie Mary Lyle Chair and Director, Mouse Metabolic Phenotyping Center, Vanderbilt University).

Mladen was not only an excellent mentor but an impressive scientist! Hired as the last post-doctoral fellow of Charles Best in the Department of Physiology, University of Toronto, Mladen developed his own unique research focus on insulin action and glucose metabolism in exercise and diabetes in vivo, which was recognized by the most important national and international organizations in the field, including: the American Diabetes Association, the American Physiological Society, and the European Association for the Study of Diabetes. He was also the recipient of numerous honorary Degrees; the Order of Ontario; and the Order of Canada; and he was inducted into both the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame and the Royal Society of Canada, to name but a few of his honours. With the exception of Banting, Best and MacLeod, he stands as the most decorated scientist to have ever graced the Department of Physiology at the University of Toronto. Commensurate with these honours, Mladen’s list of collaborators is also incredibly impressive, reading like a worldwide ‘Who’s Who’ of diabetes research, including: Richard Bergman (Cedars-Sinai Hospital, CA); Michael Berger (University of Dusseldorf); Suad Efendic and Rolf Luft (Karolinska Institutet, Sweden); Philippe Halban and Albert Renold (University of Geneva, Switzerland); Ed Horton (Joslin Diabetes Center, MA); Errol Marliss (McGill University, Montreal); Dan Porte (UC San Diego, CA); and Marc Prentki (CHUM Research Centre, Montreal), not to mention numerous local outstanding scientists (including Adria Giacca, Amira Klip, Gary Lewis, Stephen Matthews, Michael Riddell, George Steiner, Cecil Yip and Bernie Zinman).
But Mladen was so much more than a scientist – he was a Renaissance man! His passion for music and opera ran deep. His home was filled with many fine examples of painting and sculpture including, most notably, works by Croatian artists. Indeed, his knowledge of all things Croatian was prodigious, even extending to football as evidenced by his enthusiasm for the Croatian team that played in the World Cup Soccer games last summer. He also loved motion pictures, although we often disagreed about the distinction between a movie and a film - in my mind, at least, the former being entertaining and much less serious than the latter, but both being equal in Mladen’s opinion. Mladen also loved to travel to new places, and he often stayed for several days beyond a scientific conference in order to experience the culture of a new city. To his last days, Mladen spent hours enriching his knowledge, reading newspapers, listening to audio books and, always, asking for updates about his colleagues in the Department of Physiology, the Banting and Best Diabetes Centre, and the Division of Endocrinology. Finally, above all, Mladen adored and treasured his family – Iva and her family; Claire and her family, Anne and, of course, Linda, who was with Mladen throughout the years that I knew him, and who was his ‘rock’ – without Linda, Mladen would not have been the man that so many of us knew and loved…

Donations to honour the scientific and training legacy of Mladen Vranic may be made through the Banting and Best Diabetes Centre (http://donate.utoronto.ca/give/show/298) (please indicate note that “the donation is being made in the memory of Mladen Vranic”).

Patricia Brubaker, PhD, FRSC, CRC