

EASL International Recognition Awardee 2008

**Andrés T. Blei, MD**



In 2007, the Governing Board of the European Association for the Study of the Liver decided to create an Annual “EASL International Recognition Award” to honour a non-European hepatologist with an outstanding scientific and medical career in the field of liver diseases. Andrés T Blei (“Andy”) was selected for the first award, which was presented to him during the Annual EASL Meeting in Milan, May 2008.

In addition to being an excellent clinician and a productive researcher, Andy is a highly cultured person with a profound curiosity not only for medicine but also for many other aspects of life. He is very interested in human problems around the world, with a European concept for the essential rights of life (health, education, opportunities), loyal to his friends and origins and very generous with his collaborators. The family and personal trajectory of Andy (b. 1949), which is very complex, has contributed to his rich and multifaceted personality. He is the son of European Jewish immigrants (Czech/Hungarian) who left Europe for Buenos Aires after the Second World War. At that time, Argentina was an extremely rich and scarcely populated country that experienced high immigration from Europe. Buenos Aires was one of the most important cities in the world, rich both culturally and academically with a strong

economy. It also became home to the largest Jewish community in Latin America. Andy studied at St. Andrew’s Scots School in Buenos Aires until 1966, graduated “summa cum laude” from the University of Buenos Aires School of Medicine in 1973 and was Resident in Internal Medicine in the Posadas Hospital in Buenos Aires between 1973 and 1976. In 1976, after the military coup, he left Argentina for the United States. Initially (1976–1978), he worked with Professor Groszmann at the West Haven VA Hospital and Yale University School of Medicine. Professor Groszmann, also from Buenos Aires, was at that time initiating his formidable academic career in the field of portal hypertension and with him, Andy made his first steps in the research of the complications of cirrhosis. Subsequently, Andy moved to Chicago where he developed his entire career, from being a fellow in gastroenterology at the University of Chicago School of Medicine (1978–1980), to his current position of Professor of Medicine and Surgery at the Northwestern University and former Chief of Clinical Hepatology at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

The powerful combination of a Central European and Jewish background, his education at a British school, and his life in a country with a strong Latin personality

produced splendid results. He is fluent in English, Spanish and Hungarian, has excellent French and Italian and enjoys reading literature in its original language, particularly the Latin American contemporary authors. Andy is highly interested in events occurring beyond the American borders, regularly reads the most important European newspapers and is aware of the most relevant European or Latin American problems. His loves in life are opera and a good game of football, such as the Brazilian win in the 1970 World Cup against Italy and more recently the Spanish win against Russia in the semi-finals of the European championship held this year.

Andy's research has focused on the field of cirrhosis and acute liver failure, but without any doubt his most productive topic is hepatic encephalopathy. Andy is not simply a hepatologist doing clinical research in hepatic coma. He has a profound knowledge of neurophysiology and, together with the few other neuro-hepatologists and neuro-hepato-physiologists, has changed our concepts of cerebral dysfunction in acute and chronic liver failure. The first article by Andy on hepatic encephalopathy was published in *Gastroenterology* in 1986 and described the development of brain edema in an experimental model of acute liver failure. Subsequently, he published almost 70 more articles in this area. Andy's group developed animal models of acute liver failure, brain edema and portal-systemic shunting with hepatic encephalopathy to test his ideas on the mechanisms of cerebral dysfunction in liver failure. Fruit of these studies is the current hypothesis of the pathogenesis of hepatic encephalopathy and brain edema in acute liver failure: an osmotic disturbance of the brain triggers an oxidative stress response in astrocytes, including an increase in cerebral blood flow. In humans, the problem of intracranial pressure monitoring has been tackled with "hard data". Another area of interest is the disturbance in circadian biology seen in patients and experimental models with cirrhosis, which is relevant due to the high frequency of sleep abnormalities associated with this disease. The current hypothesis of this problem is based on Andy's findings: a decreased clearance of melatonin by the liver induces a shift of the biological clock, the suprachiasmatic nucleus of

the anterior hypothalamus. Andy is currently involved in exploring new approaches for the management of encephalopathy in acute and chronic liver failure, including hypothermia and the albumin dialysis. In recognition of his efforts, the American Society of Clinical Investigation elected him to membership in 1996.

His work as chief of Clinical Hepatology has been intense over the years and he has been closely involved in the care of liver patients. He began a liver transplant program at Northwestern in 1993, a program that today ranks among the top 10 in the United States in number of procedures performed, including much experience with living-related donors. Interest in editorial activity led him to periods as Associate Editor of both *Hepatology* and *Journal of Hepatology*. In 2001, the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases selected him as Editor-in-Chief of *Hepatology*, a tenure that spanned the years 2001 to 2006. Under his guidance, the journal rose in its visibility (Impact Factor from 7.3 to 10.4), he created a tight editorial team from across the world and increased the scientific and the humanistic content of its pages. The AASLD has recognized these efforts and will be giving him the Distinguished Service Award during the annual meeting in 2008.

Andy lives in Chicago with his wife, Estela, a practicing pathologist and two children, Daniela (a graduate student in History at Stanford), and Alex (a recent graduate in Urban Planning from New York University). Andy's family still searches for the key to the house where they lived in a small Czech/Hungarian village (Uzhorod/Ungvar). Unfortunately, at present they have no house in Europe. Nevertheless, he knows that the houses of many European hepatologists are open to him in recognition of his trajectory as a clinician, scientist and friend.

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