

OBITUARY



Martin Tabler

On April 3, 2005, at the early age of 48, our friend and colleague Martin Tabler lost his life in a tragic accident while visiting Bulgaria during a collaborative visit.

A German by origin, he lived in Greece, but was at heart a truly cosmopolitan scientist. Martin started his scientific life as a student of biochemistry at Tübingen University. Through an agreement between his university and the Max-Planck-Institute in Martinsried, he was given the opportunity to enroll in an advanced course under the supervision of Prof. Gerisch and others. In retrospect, it seems that this experience strongly affected his future path, since—like some others of the best ‘Tübinger Studenten’—he returned to the MPI for his diploma thesis to work on viroids, a theme that he followed up throughout his scientific career. It was here he met Mina Tsagris, his wife and partner in life and science ever since.

His first paper on viroids appeared in 1984 in the EMBO Journal. These were the early days of viroid research, and Martin was at the heart of this fascinating subject in the Sanger laboratory. It was an obvious choice to stay there for his Ph.D. thesis, which he concluded in 1986 with honours. For his achievements, he was awarded the Otto-Hahn Medal. In his work, Martin showed that cloned single- and double-stranded DNA copies of potato spindle tuber viroid (PSTVd), as well as different PSTVd RNAs synthesized *in vitro*, were infectious. These were important findings, published in two papers in EMBO J. Subsequently, he co-authored other papers with Mina showing that the oligomeric PSTVd RNA intermediates resulting from a rolling-circle replication mechanism were accurately processed when incubated under certain conditions. However, cleavage was not autocatalytic as reported in 1986 for another viroid that contains hammerhead ribozymes. This fortuitous encounter with ribozymes, the rising stars in RNA research at that time, probably influenced Martin’s decision to move and concentrate his efforts for the next 10 years into this new field, potentially endowed with important biotechnological implications. Martin continued his research as a staff scientist at the MPI until 1988, and moved then to the newly founded Institute of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology (IMBB) in Heraklion, Crete, which offered the possibility of fully independent research.

By the beginning of the new millenium, Martin realized the importance of another emerging paradigm, RNA silencing, to which he enthusiastically dedicated his efforts until his untimely death. Having a background in different areas is advantageous, and Martin’s laboratory provided the first evidence, in 2001 (European collaboration), that viroids are capable of inducing

post-transcriptional gene silencing in plants. It was also in his laboratory where a new isolation method for RNA binding proteins was developed, and the first PSTVd binding protein was identified from the host plant, tomato.

Martin always responded with keen interest when new, exciting research topics emerged. His contributions to RNA biology have been many. Thus, he moved to ribozymes, then antisense RNA, and—in recent years—to RNA interference and miRNAs. All of these transitions were ‘smooth’ and logical shifts born out of knowledge acquired in, and questions arising from, previous work. Martin was an ‘RNA world’ aficionado in the true sense; he was fascinated by aspects of biology in which RNAs play key roles. Yet, he was not a man who got carried away easily. His critical, analytical intellect and his obsession with careful evaluation of data made him a model for many scientists who had the opportunity and pleasure to work with him. Though in a way an ‘RNA specialist’, Martin moved freely between biological model systems. Although he always considered himself primarily a plant person, he used a ‘holistic’ approach and applied his knowledge to fruit flies, nematodes and human cells, making use of collaborations at FORTH and on the international level. Typical examples are a publication from 2001 (Boutla *et al.*, *Curr. Biol.* **11**, 1776–1780)—one of the first demonstrations that RNA interference is active at a whole organism level—and a *Nucleic Acids Res.* paper from 2002, in which he and his collaborators showed RNAs derived from GFP-silenced plants to be capable of inducing RNA silencing in *C.elegans*. This was at a time when the cross-species validity of the RNAi mechanism was not yet fully established (*Nucleic Acids Res.* **30**, 1688–1694, 2002). Martin also isolated one of the first target genes for microRNAs in *Drosophila*, using a PCR-based methodology (*Nucleic Acids Res.* **31**, 4973–4980, 2003).

Martin was not only a great scientist. Much of the respect and friendship he gained over the years is due to a second, highly underrated quality: he was truly a great guy. We who knew Martin for years loved his pleasant personality and his caring for others—friends and collaborators. Many e-mails we received testify to the same feelings of having lost a friend who will be remembered for *all* he was, not just what he has achieved in his profession. He was deeply devoted to science, but emphasized the human dimension in dealing with his group and with collaborators (and competitors) elsewhere. One student told us: Martin even used his role as a ‘foreigner’ in Greece as an excuse to keep out of politics, rather focusing on what he felt was more important—the pursuit of science, and its teaching to whoever was willing to learn. This honest approach was much appreciated by his students and post-docs, and inspired others. He could transfer his own enthusiasm to his co-workers and lead them to scientific success without running what sometimes is referred to as a ‘high pressure lab’. As another co-worker wrote: ‘People loved to work with him because he motivated them for self-motivation’. As a result, he can be proud of an impressive ‘scientific offspring’ from his laboratory.

‘Keeping out of politics’ did not imply avoiding unpleasant work. Martin volunteered to co-ordinate several European grant applications. All those who have been involved in such work know what a laborious and sometimes frustrating task this is! His style in organization of this administrative work—some of us were partners in EU networks led by Martin—was reminiscent of the way he organized his research: well structured and in close co-operation with his peers. Everyone who worked with him will agree that it was always a pleasure and a productive, stimulating experience. Martin also featured prominently in the promotion of science in Eastern European countries, especially through the Copernicus program. He had many connections with collaborators and became involved in the TEMPUS program which helped in developing a Biotechnology Undergraduate and PhD program in Bulgaria.

For all who knew him, Martin was an example of a great scientist, teacher and friend. He was creative, full of ideas and scientific curiosity, and keen to meet new scientific challenges. In this sense, his achievements and style, in a way best characterized by understatement and modesty, will stay alive in the memory of his friends and colleagues. He has left his mark in the scientific community, and his way of living science will remain a standard for all of us.

Whenever a dear person passes away, one feels grief, but we are grateful for having known Martin and for having shared part of his life. We will miss him but keep fond memories of him at the peak of his life as a great friend and colleague. We feel deeply in sympathy with Mina, Martin’s wife, and their beautiful children, Sophia and Alexander.

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Editorial note: Martin Tabler was a member of the *NAR* Editorial Board since 2003 as well as a much admired *NAR* author and reviewer.