



## OBITUARY

# Irvin Korr Ph.D. (1909–2004)

We have all heard the expression that as practitioners we are 'standing on the shoulders of giants'? With neurophysiologist Irvin Korr's passing one of the true intellectual giants of the past century has left us.

I did not know him well, but had the good fortune to meet him, and to hear him lecture, and was grateful for his work—which explained a great deal about the mechanisms underpinning osteopathic treatment (Fig. 1). The importance of Korr's work cannot be over-estimated. His pioneering and diligent research, particularly into areas such as segmental facilitation (Korr 1947, 1948, 1986), and the trophic function of nerves (Korr 1967), opened new vistas. He quite literally put flesh on the bones of earlier osteopathic theory. His ability to cross professional and political divides is exemplified by the two contributions (below) to this salute to a marvellous man. These describe the man and his work from the perspectives of two people who knew him, one by an osteopathic teacher, writer and practitioner, Professor Zachary Comeaux DO—and the other by chiropractic teacher, writer and practitioner, Craig Liebenson DC.

Leon Chaitow, Editor JBMT.

### Zachary Comeaux DO wrote:

March 4, 2004 marked the end of a memorable life, when Irvin Korr Ph.D., Osteopathic Champion, succumbed at 94, in Boulder Colorado. Known to his

many friends in the osteopathic profession as Kim, Korr frequently attributed his long life, and prolonged intellectual activity, to having received quality osteopathic care.

After postgraduate studies in physiology at Princeton University, Kim joined the faculty at Kirksville College of Osteopathy and Surgery in 1945 as professor and chairman of the physiology department. Joining with Stedman Denslow, a 1929 graduate of the same institution, they together spent decades adding scientific legitimacy, through experimentation and publication, to the clinically based practice of osteopathy. Much of their early work centered on demonstrating the hyperarousal of the sympathetic nervous system associated with what was then termed the osteopathic lesion. Later this was known as the concept of spinal (or segmental) facilitation (Denslow et al., 1947).

Dr. Korr retired from Kirksville College in 1975, assuming a position of professor in the Department of Biomechanics at Michigan State University—College of Osteopathic Medicine. In 1978 he joined the faculty at the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine as professor of the Department of Osteopathic Theory and Practice. However with the position came responsibility as president, dean, department head and course coordinator. At this time he also met his surviving wife, Janet, who eventually convinced him to move to her home, Boulder.

Korr's keen interest in the neurophysiologic aspects of osteopathic work led to the gamma loop hypothesis for the persistence of increased muscle tone associated with somatic dysfunction Korr (1975). This train of thought was adopted by Fred Mitchell, and also Laurence Jones, to legitimize the theories of Muscle Energy and StrainCounterstrain techniques respectively. Korr wrote prolifically, contributing to the physiological as well as osteopathic literature. A two volume collection of his papers is available from the American Academy of Osteopathy.

A regular speaker at American Academy of Osteopathy and American Osteopathic Association



Fig. 1 Irvin Korr Ph.D. and JBMTs editor Leon Chaitow, at a 1988 Los Angeles College of Chiropractic Symposium.

events, Korr is remembered by many of us today as being part of the effort to bring international understanding and cooperation within the osteopathic profession. At international symposia and conferences he was recognized both as an intellectual and motivational leader. He had a unique way of integrating personal clinical experience (as a patient), deep scientific theoretical understanding, and a dedication to the principles of the unity of the body and the body's self-healing capacity. In this capacity he also participated in a series of symposia, funded by the National Institutes of Health and hosted by the American Academy of Osteopathy, into the nature and understanding of chronic pain.

Besides his research, teaching and public speaking, Kim Korr was known to us as the man he was. He possessed a gentle humor, a deep wisdom and profound humility, which sometimes masked his quiet power. He was personable, and did not live on a pedestal. He will be missed, but his legacy will endure, both in his writings and in the credibility for osteopathy derived from his work.

**Craig Liebenson DC wrote:**

Irvin 'Kim' Korr inspired musculoskeletal specialists to think of the locomotor system as the primary machinery of life. His series of paper entitled *The spinal cord as organizer of disease processes* (Korr, 1976) summarized not only the early osteopathic research on segmental dysfunction, but foretold our modern understanding of central pain states such as central sensitization. Korr was most of all a unique human being whose special gift was his transcendent ability to overcome human limitations such as those imposed by institutions and even aging.

Kim Korr passionately showed that the medical approach of glorifying the viscera, which are merely organs designed to maintain the musculoskeletal system, mis-understands the true nature of the human being. He enjoyed pointing out that the Ciba collection made the common error of showing multitudes of nerve endings traveling to each internal organ, and only a scant few connected to the muscle spindles, golgi tendon organs, and joint mechanoreceptors. He would laugh as he described how actually Ciba had it backwards, since the musculoskeletal system that had 90% of the connections with the nervous system.

For Korr what made us human was our ability to "will action". We express our humanness by choosing to play piano, ski, etc. This concept anchored the osteopathic field in the ennobling area of taking care of the "whole" person, while allopathic physicians were more reductionist. In

spite of Korr's great vision he was terribly disappointed when the osteopathic profession, in the late 1950s, went against his lobbying and chose to align with the medical profession in the US.

Korr was a key figure at the first conference on spinal manipulation put on by the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Strokes circa 1975. He was so impressed that he convened a follow-up meeting at Michigan State University. Out of this came his book *Neurobiological Mechanisms of Manipulative Therapy* (Korr, 1978). Today there is great wealth of research in our fields. There are also dozens and dozens of premier scientists tackling questions relevant to our practices. Korr blazed this trail with his stunning research on the trophic effects of damage to nerves (Korr, 1967, 1981).

One of the most fascinating aspects to Korr's life was his ability to transform himself. In his 40s he discovered that he had become a sedentary, desk jock and that his vitality was slipping. For one of the first times he visited an osteopath and requested a treatment. A small adjustment was administered. He then went for a walk and found the irresistible urge to break into a jog—for the first time in many years! Soon he was breathing heavily and propped up against a tree when he took a deep breath in and felt his rib cage fully expand literally tearing small adhesions. From that moment he described a transformation in his life. He threw away his sunglasses realizing that he could autonomously control his pupils without them. Yogilike he began to walk the walk of person intent on demonstrating the potential of transformational thinking for promoting health and longevity.

He left Michigan State University in his 60s to join the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine (TCOM) where he spearheaded efforts to build the first preventive medicine curriculum in North America. When visiting the Los Angeles College of Chiropractic in 1997 he addressed the college's Deans and spoke of his struggles with tenured faculty who resisted the radical curricular changes at TCOM. Korr's stature at such moments could only be described as courageous.

Anyone who spent time with this legendary figure recalls his wonderful sense of humor. Always with a gleam in his eye while he deadpanned one of his frequent puns. It seemed he enjoyed finding connections, not only between somatic structures and the spinal cord, but between words!

During Kim Korr's later years in Texas, just prior to moving to Colorado he found a new passion he called Eugeriatrics. Distilled from his years of experience with osteopaths he found an essential truth regarding the rejuvenating benefits of

movement in the elderly. He would travel around senior centers teaching basic yoga so that instead of giving in to drugs and activity limitations the elderly could learn the liberating power of transforming their bodies at any age! Publishers resisted his approaches, but he continued teaching these self-help strategies while amazing people with his youthful appearance in spite of his advanced age.

It is hard not picture him walking briskly, with a small smile on his face and a glint in his eyes. Almost Yoda like.

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## Further reading

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