



Prof. dr. med. vet. h.c. Páll A. Pálsson (1919 - 2003)

Dr. Páll Agnar Pálsson (1919-2003)

A biographical sketch

by

Gudmundur Pétursson

Páll Agnar Pálsson was born on May 9, 1919 at the farm Klettur in Reykholtssdalur in Western Iceland. He died in Reykjavik on July 10, 2003. His parents were Páll Zóphóniasson, Principal of the Agricultural College at Hólar in Northern Iceland and later Director of Agriculture and member of the Icelandic Parliament, and his wife Gudrun Hannesdóttir. Páll A. Pálsson graduated from the Gymnasium in Reykjavik in 1937 and then spent a year in Eastern

Greenland with a geological expedition under the direction of the well-known Danish explorer Lauge Koch. In 1938 he started his veterinary studies at the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen and graduated in 1944. During his studies he met his future wife Kirsten Henriksen from Copenhagen who also graduated as a veterinarian the same year and they were married in 1946. In 1944 and part of 1945 Pálsson worked as an assistant in general veterinary practice in Jutland and also in meat inspection in slaughterhouses. In the years 1945-1948 he received postgraduate training in veterinary pathology and microbiology at the Royal University under A. Følger and in the State Veterinary Serum Laboratorium in Copenhagen with M. Christiansen, N. Plum and H. Ottosen. Subsequently he continued his speciality training at the State Veterinary Medical Laboratory in Stockholm with A. Hjärre, at the Moredun Institute in Edinburgh with J. Stamp and in the Pathology Department of the Central Veterinary Laboratory in Weybridge, England with N. Hole.

In 1948 Pálsson returned to Iceland and worked for a few months at the Laboratory of Pathology of the Medical Faculty of the University of Iceland with Professor N. Dungal who, besides being a pioneer of medical pathology and microbiology in Iceland, also made significant contributions to research in the veterinary field. There was and still is no veterinary school in Iceland but at this

time some devastating sheep diseases were an urgent problem in Icelandic agriculture following the importation of sheep of the Karakul breed in 1933. These sheep brought with them pulmonary adenomatosis, maedi-visna and paratuberculosis, which caused great losses in the susceptible Icelandic sheep flocks. In order to deal with these epizootics and other animal diseases in Iceland a new institute was established, the Institute for Experimental Pathology at Keldur, which was affiliated with the Medical Faculty of the University of Iceland. This institute was under the direction of a medical virologist, Björn Sigurdsson, who later became widely known for his concepts of slow viral infections. Pálsson was appointed to the Keldur institute from the beginning, in the autumn 1948. In 1956 he was given the title of Chief Veterinary Officer of Iceland, a position he held concurrently with his duties at Keldur for 33 years until his formal retirement at the age of 70 in 1989. After Sigurdsson's death in 1959, Pálsson was appointed director of the institute and served in this capacity until 1967, still serving at the same time as the head of the Icelandic national veterinary service. After 1967 he continued his appointment as a scientific staff member of the institute at Keldur.

Pálsson was active in scientific research at Keldur for more than 40 years. He was largely responsible for extensive field-testing of a killed vaccine against sheep paratuberculosis, originally developed by B. Sigurdsson and which practically eliminated losses due to this disease. He collaborated closely with B. Sigurdsson, G. Gíslason and H. Grímsson on the early studies of the so-called Karakul diseases of sheep, pulmonary adenomatosis and maedi-visna, and also on sheep scrapie. The results of these studies provided the basis for the concept of slow viral diseases. Research on maedi-visna and scrapie has continued at Keldur to this day and Pálsson was an active participant in such teamwork throughout his career at Keldur. He was also active in studies of many animal diseases such as listeriosis, sheep mycoplasmal pneumonia, "falling disease" of cattle, enzootic ataxia or "swayback" in lambs due to copper deficiency, tooth loss in sheep and fluorosis in farm animals after volcanic eruptions. He was in charge of vaccine production at Keldur against paratuberculosis, clostridial diseases of sheep (lamb dysentery, pulpy kidney, enterotoxaemia and bradset or braxy) and sheep pneumonia due to *Pasteurella*. He was also involved in research on human multiple sclerosis. Thanks to his vigilance several animal diseases brought to Iceland were promptly eradicated: pullorum disease of chicken, vesicular exanthema of swine, bovine tuberculosis and ringworm of cattle. As Chief Veterinary Officer he played an important part in preparing legislation and regulations concerning health control of animals and he was constantly on his guard in preventing importation of animal diseases.

Páll. A. Pálsson published many scientific papers in international journals, sometimes as a sole author but more commonly as a member of a team. He was always very supportive of his collaborators but had a tendency to keep himself more in the background. He was also untiring in writing articles to educate vete-

rinarians, farmers and the general public about animal diseases and published several articles on the history of animal diseases in Iceland, such as the eradication of echinococcosis in Iceland and on the history of research at the Institute of Experimental Pathology at Keldur. His bibliography consists of more than 200 publications.

Pálsson was highly respected not only by the veterinary profession, the farmers and his collaborators in Iceland but also by foreign colleagues. Pálsson was trusted with many functions during his lifetime. He was a member of the executive committee of the Society of Icelandic University Students in Copenhagen and also of the Icelandic Society in Denmark. He was vice president of the Union of Icelandic Horse Societies from 1951-1963. He was a member of the Council for Experimental Animal Husbandry from 1960-1965, on the Committee for the Protection of Animals from 1958-1978 and on the governing committee of the Icelandic Science Foundation from 1972-1975. He served as president of the Commission of Fish Diseases from 1970-1989 and served on a committee for Control of Fluorine Emission from aluminium factories from 1969-1984. He was also member of the Icelandic Committee on Drugs and for several years member of the Animal Protection Committee of the Council of Europe from 1968-1994.

He was elected as member of the Icelandic Academy of Science in 1965 and was made Knight of the Icelandic Order of the Falcon in 1974. In 1976 he was awarded an honorary prize of the Ása Guðmundsdóttir Wright Foundation. He was made Dr. med. vet. h. c. by the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen in 1974 and also by the Norwegian Veterinary College the same year. In 1986 he was awarded the title of Dr. med. h. c. by the Medical Faculty of the University of Iceland. In 1992 he became an honorary member of the Finnish Veterinary Association and 1994 of the Icelandic Veterinary Association.

Pálsson was well read in history and literature. He appreciated good art and was also a lover of nature and outdoor activities. During short summer vacations he loved to travel with his wife and a selected group of friends on horseback through the Icelandic highlands, bringing camping equipment, food and other necessities on pack horses and he was a pioneer in this type of travel. His wife, Kirsten Henriksen, worked in a small animal practice in Reykjavík for many years but supported her husband loyally in many ways in his heavy work schedule. They were gracious hosts and an invitation to their home was an unforgettable experience because of the unique atmosphere of warm hospitality they knew so well how to create.

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