

2008 Dickson Awardee: Kurt Benirschke

Dr. Kurt Benirschke joined the faculty of University of California San Diego School of Medicine in 1970, shortly after the school opened. He established a genetics laboratory, ran the autopsy service for the university hospital and almost immediately became an influential voice and figure in the world of animal conservation. He served nearly a quarter of a century as a noted pathologist, geneticist and expert on the placenta and reproductive systems of humans and myriad mammalian species. He became internationally known for his successful efforts to create the world's first "frozen zoo."



Benirschke moved freely between human medicine and animal medicine, considering lessons learned to be universal. Kurt was always busy: teaching courses, conducting research and lecturing around the world. In 1976 he persuaded the Board of Trustees to create a research department and he led this new research department until 1987 when he became a member of the Zoo's Board of Trustees. From 1976 to 1978, he served as chair of the Department of Pathology at UC San Diego School of Medicine and played a key role in the creation and success of the Center for Academic Research and Training in Anthropogeny (CARTA).

He formally retired as professor emeritus in 1994 but remained active as a consultant to the autopsy service, in the field overseeing a breeding facility in Paraguay for a newly discovered species of peccary and in publishing scholarly papers. Since 1994, the departments of Pediatrics and Obstetrics, Gynecology & Reproductive Sciences have presented the annual Kurt Benirschke Lecture, featuring international experts on topics relevant to biology and procreation.

Benirschke produced more than 500 scientific publications and more than 30 books, including the authoritative text "Pathology of the Human Placenta," now in its sixth edition. He received numerous honors and awards, including the Virginia Apgar Award in 1998 from the American Academy of Pediatrics. He was a member of many scientific societies, including the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Kurt Benirschke, whose medical and scientific interests spanned the animal kingdom and likely saved more than a few species from extinction, passed away on September 10, 2018 at the age of 94.