Prof. MUDr. Eva Syková, DrSc., FCMA
(* July 24, 1944, Rožmitál pod Třemšínem) is a Czech doctor, scientist, and director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.
Along with her scientific profession, she also lectures at medical faculties. In 1994, she became an Associate Professor at Charles University in Prague, in the field of physiology. Six years later, she became a Professor of Physiology and Pathological Physiology. Since the year 1991, she has been the Head of Neuroscience at the 2nd Medical Faculty of Charles University.
She participated in study visits to the universities of Gothenburg, Heidelberg, and Perth. In her scientific research, she specialises in brain and stem cell research. She is the author of more than 850 publications, one monograph and a co-author of 6 patents. Her works have been cited more than 6,500 times, her h-index is 46. She has received numerous awards and prizes for her scientific achievements, is a member of many national and international societies and serves on several of their steering committees, has organized a number of international congresses, workshops and symposia, and serves on the review boards of Czech grant agencies and the editorial boards of leading international biomedical journals. She is married to the neurophysiologist professor MUDr. Josef Syka, DrSc. They have two sons, Ing. Josef Syka and MUDr. Michael Syka.

Photos: Mgr. Stanislava Kyzelová, Akademický bulletin
The title Female Manager of the Year 2011 was awarded to the rector of the Institute of Experimental Medicine Eva Sykova. The managerial function at the Academy of Sciences is equivalent to a top business position under her command. Behind her success stand years of hard work, a series of sound strategic decisions and business imagination. When speaking with this very agreeable and elegant lady, you sense quite clearly that underneath her modest self-presentation, there is an awareness of her personal goals, which the previous candidate for the position of Chairwoman of the Academy of Sciences knows how to achieve.

You are a graduate doctor and a world class scientist. How does a doctor and scientist become a senior manager? For many years, I used to be mainly a scientist. Today, I am a manager and a scientist roughly half-and-half. I certainly enjoy both roles. When you work on medical research, what matters are your publications, so that you gain an international reputation, which is based chiefly on the published results of your primary research in international journals. Further, it is important whether the results are applied anywhere; whether your findings will contribute to a better quality of life, whether, for example, it cures seriously ill patients. And for this, you already need management skills. This is how I got involved in managerial work. I founded the Neuroscience Institute at the 2nd Medical Faculty, with an aim of bringing research results to patients as fast as possible. We have created a number of spin-off firms that are based in the business incubator of the Institute of Experimental Medicine; the construction of the business incubator was made possible thanks to European funds. Here, we provide an opportunity for creating firms that will apply the results of our Institute as well as to European funds. A cooperation with a number of hospitals and health centres and assist them in formulating projects and clinical trials. For this you need organization and a sound management approach.

What do you consider as your key ability which helped you to succeed? Could it be that I make good decisions and always look to the future? Research into the use of stem cells has advanced considerably in the past couple of years, and this has persuaded me that cell therapy and tissue engineering are the areas of the future. For this reason, I have bet on it in the Institute, and I believe it has been the right decision. We combine work with cells and biomaterials, such as polymers and nanofibres, which is a fairly unique combination. We conduct pre-clinical trials and test stem cells on animals suffering diseases of the nervous system. We have models of stroke, brain and spinal cord injuries. Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and many other diseases that modern medicine cannot cure.

Could you explain to the laymen what benefits could stem cells bring? There is the hope that stem cells could replace certain organs that are damaged, or that they could cure diseases which we currently have no means to cure. Apart from neurological disorders, these could include myocardial infarction, diabetes, liver failure, diabetic foot syndrome, limb ischemia, damaged cartilages and bones, and more. In the brain, the transplantation of nervous tissue may never be possible; therefore, stem cells remain the only hope.

What is important for you when managing people? To appreciate the best results and to support young scientists, as they represent the future of our Institute as well as Czech science. We support all scientists both financially and also by letting others know about their work. We publish results on an institutional bulletin board, we make score tables of the best scientists in the Institute. We have defined the minimal criteria that must be reached by our scientists. If they are not able to meet them, there is an accreditation commission that will assess their future value in our institute. People can apply themselves somewhere else, they can become teachers, or they can work somewhere in companies. If someone wishes to be a researcher, he or she must have a talent for it and be motivated, creative, and imaginative, be able to endure, write and obtain grants. If they cannot do this, they are not suitable for research. We are not a care home; we cannot employ people without good, important results.

Are you doing well in maintaining a positive atmosphere in the Institute? I have been voted a director for the third time already, and again for five years. The executive staff therefore must be content with the atmosphere that exists here. There should be no tension here but rather a calm environment for creative work, and this is important for me. I also take care that the Institute and its surroundings create a pleasant environment to work in.

Do you think you would have become a leader, even if you followed a different career path? If I were a businesswoman, lawyer or politician or general practitioner at a clinic, I can certainly imagine I would still be managing people. The managing would come later, however. In my youth, I based everything on hard work to achieve what I wanted. At that time, my chief goal was to “find something.” Only later, I needed to organise people around me, I had international contracts and the position of a director came along, where one needs to think about making the Institute the best possible.

Do you have any plan for the Institute? I daily receive phone calls from patients who are desperate about their medical conditions and are waiting for our help. I would like to transfer as many results in clinical practice as possible. Several clinical studies are currently being launched by the Institute; this is what I focus on. In the private sector, the directors work a lot with financial motivation of their employees. I suppose you are more constrained in this respect...

Thankfully we are not any more. We can manage our resources at our discretion. We can either have a lot of people for little money, or otherwise. This is something we carefully assess. From my own experience, I know that if you need to think about how to earn more money in order to secure your family a certain standard of living, your work will be affected. I therefore try to achieve a balance. We need to motivate our employees to bring money to the Institute in the form of grants. These grants should include, according to our strategy, money for salaries as well, so that we can augment these and our employees are happy. We are one of a few institutes where Ph.D. students also receive salaries in addition to their scholarships. This is because a scholarship of CZK 6000 is nothing on which one could live, and these people often have families already. We also allow mothers of young children to have flexible working hours.

Do you have time for family and for relaxation? I enjoy music and exercise. I attend various social events several times a week and go to classical concerts. This relaxes me. Reconciling work with family is easy for me these days. When my children were smaller, however, it was much more difficult, though I believe that managing both work and family is an important managerial task of a woman. Each of us must perform it in a manner that both prosper. I used to give my whole salary to a lady whom I trusted would take good care of my small children when I was at work. Today, this is no longer a problem for senior female managers who are paid well; unfortunately, often it is too late to have children then. Life is not easy for a starting female researcher. A family is like a small company; it is about providing for the employees. I always tell my colleagues that it very much depends on the partner they choose. When selecting a partner of one’s children it is necessary to think rationally. A woman wanting a career must look for a partner who will not only accept her ambitions, but who will also want to actively participate in everyday family life.

By Barbara Hansen Chechová, HR Forum

[Image of interview with Eva Sykova]