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Obituary for Prof. Dr. Günther Rathner (1949–2025)

Andreas Karwautz · Karin Waldherr · Michael Zeiler · Ulrike Smrekar · Gerard Butcher · Ferenc Tury ·
Ulrike Schmidt · Steven Touyz

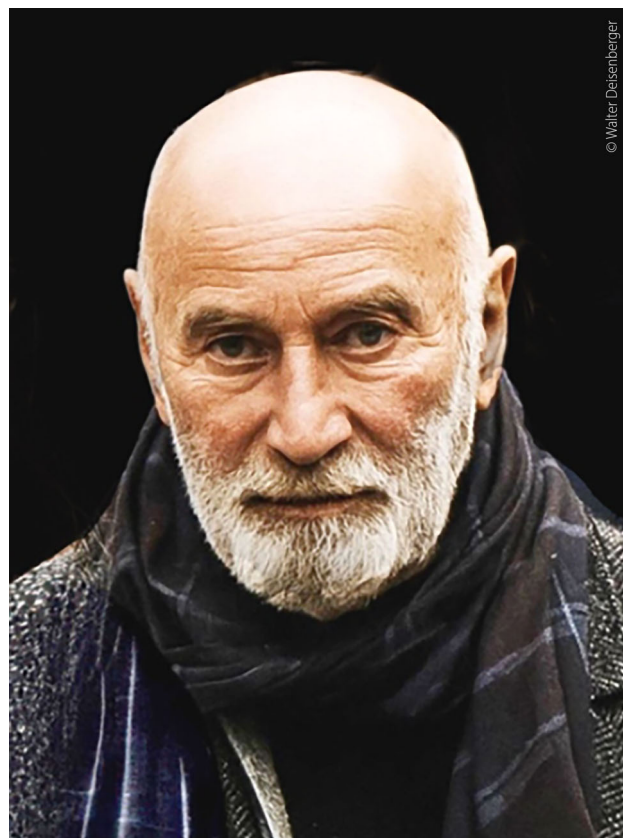
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Univ. Prof. Dr. Günther Rathner was the founder of “Netzwerk Essstörungen” in Innsbruck and the “Austrian Society for Eating Disorders”. He was an excellent psychologist and clinician and had a great sense for research questions within international frameworks. He very early initiated long-standing recognition for the field of eating disorders in the Austrian society and health politics, a pioneer worker. We will miss him.

Prof. Dr. Andreas Karwautz, FAED

Eating Disorders Unit for Children and Adolescents, University Campus, Medical University Vienna



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Univ. Prof. Dr. Günther Rathner
(29 July 1949–31 August 2025)

The Austrian Society for Eating Disorders (ÖGES) mourns the passing of its founding president, Univ. Prof. Dr Günther Rathner, who died on 31 August 2025 in Innsbruck.

Univ.-Prof. A. Karwautz (✉)

Universitätsklinik für Kinder- und Jugendpsychiatrie, Eating Disorders Unit, Medizinische Universität Wien, Vienna, Austria

andreas.karwautz@meduniwien.ac.at

Günther Rathner was an Associate Professor of Medical Psychology, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics at the University Clinic for Medical Psychology and Psychotherapy in Innsbruck. He was a psychotherapist specializing in systemic family therapy and client-centered psychotherapy, as well as a clinical and health psychologist.

He was a pioneer in the field of eating disorders, both in Austria and internationally, advocating for the rights of those affected and their families and contributing significantly to the professionalization of the field.

In the mid-1980s, he established the first specialized department for eating disorders in children and adolescents at the Medical University of Innsbruck. In 1990, he founded the Eating Disorders Network in Innsbruck—a nonprofit organization operating across Austria with the goal of raising public awareness and offering low-threshold counselling services. The Eating Disorders Network is thus one of the oldest institutions in this field in the German-speaking world.

Finally, on 4 October 2000—almost exactly 25 years ago—he founded the Austrian Society for Eating Disorders (ÖGES), serving as its president until 2014.

Dr. Rathner was deeply committed to advancing education and international cooperation on eating disorders, particularly by supporting and training young colleagues in the field. He founded the now well-established International Congress on Eating Disorders in Alpbach (Tyrol), which he led as scientific director until 2019.

He was a founding member of the European Council of Eating Disorders (ECED), a society aimed at building a multidisciplinary European network of clinicians and experts in the field of eating disorders.

He also created and led an accredited postgraduate training curriculum on “Therapy of Eating Disorders”—still unique in Austria—and worked as a supervisor in the development of counselling centers and specialized outpatient clinics for eating disorders.

In addition, he was the author of numerous scientific publications, researching, among other topics, the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions for eating disorders and obesity, the prevalence of eating disorders in various populations, and the development and validation of assessment tools for eating disorders.

For many years, he also served on the editorial boards of the *European Eating Disorders Review* and the journal *Eating and Weight Disorders*.

Günther Rathner has left a lasting impression on many of us, and we are deeply grateful for the mentorship and friendship we experienced over the past 30 years. He will be greatly missed, and we will strive to continue the work he began, in his spirit, for the benefit of those affected by eating disorders.

Michael Zeiler, Andreas Karwautz, Karin Waldherr for

The Executive Board of the Austrian Society for Eating Disorders (www.oeges.or.at)

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With deep gratitude and profound respect, we bid farewell to Univ.-Prof. Dr Günther Rathner by Chairwoman Ulrike Smrekar, Network Eating Disorders Association, Innsbruck

As a long-standing colleague, I had the privilege of sharing in Günther's work and initiatives and accompanying him along part of his journey. From the very beginning, Günther's vision was to provide comprehensive, patient- and family-oriented treatment. After establishing a multimodal structure for inpatient treatment, it was only consistent for him to seek to inform the public about eating disorders, to promote prevention, and to build a specialized network of outpatient treatment—the birth of the *Network Eating Disorders*.

Thus, in 1990, the *Network Eating Disorders* came into being—a low-threshold, nonprofit organization dedicated ever since to counselling, education, and prevention. With his outstanding expertise and foresight, Günther shaped the network's professional direction. He was not only its founder but also, for decades, its heart and driving force: as chairman, in management, in supervision, and as a mentor to countless aspiring psychologists and psychotherapists. Informational materials and funding applications bore his unmistakable touch. Students of psychology and trainee clinical psychologists gained, through internships at the Network, not only insight into professional practice but also an understanding of the lives of those affected and their families.

To this day, the Network continues to pursue Günther Rathner's goal: to improve the psychosocial situation of those affected and their relatives, to raise awareness of eating disorders, to reduce prejudice, and to expand available support. Alongside individual counselling, the Network offers a telephone helpline, school-based prevention programs, a wide range of workshops, and facilitated support groups.

Günther placed particular value on the exchange between science, clinical practice, people affected, and their families. Under his scientific leadership—later shared with Dr. Karin Waldherr—the Network went on to organize 27 of what are now 32 *International Scientific Eating Disorder Conferences*—among the most significant conferences in the German-speaking world on this topic. In 1991, it was groundbreaking to actively involve those affected and their relatives—an approach that remains exemplary to this day.

We mourn the loss of a dedicated pioneer in the field of eating disorder work—a wise, principled companion marked by great humanity, humor, and a steadfast belief in change through commitment.

His legacy lives on—in the *Network Eating Disorders*, and in all those who have benefited from his work. I count myself among them—I was able to learn from and with him, and through his initiative, in organizing training events and teaching days with specialists in psychotherapy and the treatment of eating disorders, and not least through the annual *Eating Disorder Congress*, I had the privilege of learning from the best—and of experiencing joy and enthusiasm in the work. Thank you, Günther!

Dr. Ulrike Smrekar, Network Eating Disorders Association, Innsbruck

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International contributions

As Prof. Rathner was a researcher and clinician in the field of eating disorders who was embedded in an international network, we asked some of his professional companions to offer a few words of appreciation which you can read below.

Prof. Günther Rathner—an appreciation—by Gerry Butcher, MSc, Dublin, Ireland

Günther was a founding member of the European Council on Eating Disorders (ECED) established in 1989. In part, it was his discussions with a colleague, Dr. Bridget Dolan and others, who discovered that arguing and sharing their thoughts over issues around eating disorders in the convivial atmosphere of a pub often brought greater enlightenment and understanding of different perspectives than some (I emphasize ‘some’) of the presentations delivered at conferences. As Bridget reminisced by email to some of us in ECED recently—Günther “argued loudly over whether eating disorders were ‘culture bound syndromes’ or not—the intense debate usually being punctuated by his deep guttural laugh. He did more than most of us to promote the values of the ECED particularly through his collaboration with colleagues in the former Eastern bloc.”

Günther was always keen to bring fresh faces to the annual “Netzwerk Essstörungen Conference” held in the beautiful surroundings of the alpine Tyrol village of Alpbach, Austria. I have very fond memories of speaking and listening at this conference over the years and Günther was always quick with praise and encouragement, and appropriate, but welcome, feedback if the presentation did not quite ‘hit the mark’. A strong feature of this conference was the open musical social program in which skilled musicians were encouraged (and cajoled in some cases) by Günther to entertain us after a long day at the conference. Indeed, I recall on one occasion Günther encouraging me in attempting to teach a large group how to do some basic Irish dancing steps a la ‘Riverdance’, though I am not sure I succeeded very well in this endeavor.

Günther was a wonderful and admirable man whose influence in the field of eating disorders will last beyond his death. We have lost an esteemed colleague, and his passion to engage and enlighten fellow colleagues working with those who experienced eating disorders will be sorely missed. Thank you, Günther, for many happy memories. Your legacy, I trust, will live on. On behalf of all of us in the ECED community, I extend our deepest condolences to his wife Resi on her loss.

Gerard J Butcher, MSc, Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist, ECED Steering Committee member, Dublin, Ireland

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Günther Rathner: the excellent therapist, professor, and friend—by Prof. Dr. Ferenc Túry, Budapest, Hungary

The first international congress where my colleague Pál Szabó and I participated with a rather modest presentation on the epidemiological data of eating disorders in Hungary took place in Bad Ischl in 1989. There, a young Austrian man stood out, delivering a highly professional lecture on a similar epidemiological topic. We exchanged a few words; he was kind and encouraging. It soon turned out that this was not just casual congress small talk: a few months later he contacted us, asking whether we would be interested in taking part in an epidemiological study that would also include an East German research group, making it possible to compare Austrian, East German, and Hungarian data. We felt deeply honored and, of course, agreed.

That was the beginning of my research career in the field of eating disorders, and I owe it to Günther. I was impressed by the precision with which he guided our joint publication, which was eventually published in an excellent journal, *Psychological Medicine*. Günther opened a window for me onto the international eating disorder scene. When, as one of its founding fathers, he initiated the biennial ECED congress in 1989, he also told us about it, and at the following events I too joined this remarkable gathering, from which I learned enormously. Drawing inspiration from these experiences, I established an eating disorder unit at my then workplace in Miskolc. Naturally, we invited Günther as well, to lead a family therapy workshop. With his effortless naturalness, knowledge, and charismatic therapeutic presence, he immediately won over my colleagues. We even asked him to conduct a live family therapy session with the family of a girl suffering from bulimia and diabetes. I will never forget how, at the end of the session, he summarized his thoughts and then knelt before the family with his arms outstretched. That image is eternal for me.

Later, he launched the annual conferences in Alpbach. We attended regularly, often with large Hungarian delegations, students, and PhD candidates. The

beautiful location, the autumn alpine colors, made this my favorite conference. Günther also invited the most prominent international lecturers, from whom there was so much to learn. What surprised me especially was that he also invited experts by experience, who then became regular participants at this conference.

The many hours of quality time we spent together, the intertwining of professional collaboration and friendship, gave me some of the most unforgettable moments of my professional life. I remember him with gratitude, admiration, and an eternal sense of loss.

Prof. Dr. Ferenc Túry, Institute of Behavioral Sciences, Semmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary

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Prof. Dr. Ulrike Schmidt, KCL London, UK

Guenther was always such a fun person to be around and to have discussions with. He was so well informed on so many things within and outside of eating disorders. He was also a brilliant and very generous host at all his meetings.

Ulrike Schmidt OBE MD PhD FRCPsych FMedSci FAED, Professor of Eating Disorders, King's College London

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Prof. Stephen Touyz, Sydney, Australia

Guenther's academic contributions, kindness and generosity extended to those of us working in Australia. He will be sadly missed.

Stephen Touyz PhD FAPS FAED, Emeritus Professor, Director: Inside Out Institute, Australian Eating Disorders Research and Translation Centre, Sydney, Australia

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Prof. Günther Rathner—mentor and friend—by Prof.(UAS) Dr. Karin Waldherr, Vienna, Austria

I met Günther in 1993 while studying psychology, when I had the opportunity to do an internship in the specialized unit for eating disorders in children and adolescents at the Medical University of Innsbruck, which he headed. After the 6-week internship, I was

fascinated by this work and lucky that Günther agreed to supervise my master thesis on a German-language validation of the Eating Disorder Inventory 2. That was the starting point for a long-standing mentorship, collaboration and friendship that has shaped my professional career.

However, Günther did not only had an immense impact on individual colleagues like me. He also shaped the landscape of research and practice in the field of eating disorders in Austria and beyond. Günther was a pioneer and a tireless campaigner for improving public awareness, prevention, treatment, training, and the rights of patients and their families. He brought together a small group of people in Austria working in the field of eating disorders and founded the Eating Disorders Network and the Austrian Society for Eating Disorders. He led and organized the annual conference in Alpbach for 27 years with great personal commitment and enthusiasm. Apart from his professional dedication, Günther loved socializing, networking and listening to music. He had the unique idea of organizing jam sessions on Friday evenings at the Alpbach Conference Center and convinced his colleagues to actively participate. We experienced unforgettable moments when Prof. Ferenc Tury played the zither, Prof. Kate Tchanturia sang Georgian folk songs, or Dr. Andreas Adam played the bagpipes. That is why this conference has been given such a unique atmosphere and has become popular among international colleagues. We will do our best to keep this spirit alive.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work closely with Günther for about 30 years and to enjoy his mentorship and friendship. I thank him for many fruitful conversations, and I will remember the cheerful moments in Alpbach, as well as the late-night phone calls during which we discussed important decisions regarding the conference. And I'm sure that my daughter also will remember him dearly when she uses her hiccup remedy, "Think of three bald men."

Karin Waldherr, Prof.(UAS) Dr., Head of the Department of Health Sciences, Ferdinand Porsche FERNFH—Distance Learning University of Applied Sciences, Wiener Neustadt, Austria

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