



PROFESSOR STANISŁAW ILNICKI (1942–2025) – MEDICAL DOCTOR, SCIENTIST, HUMANIST

Profesor Stanisław Ilnicki (1942–2025) –
lekarz, naukowiec, humanista



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Abstract

This article presents the profile of Professor Stanisław Ilnicki, an eminent specialist in military psychiatry who is widely regarded as a pioneer and leading authority in this field in Poland. He was the initiator of national research on combat stress and one of the architects of the psychological support system for military personnel, encompassing both participants of overseas missions and military veterans. Professor Ilnicki's scholarly output includes hundreds of publications and conference presentations, documenting his research interests as well as his practical commitment to the development of military psychiatry, particularly in its clinical and educational dimensions. The aim of this paper is to present Professor Stanisław Ilnicki's scientific and implementation achievements across all areas of his professional activity. Owing to the breadth and diversity of these accomplishments, this constitutes a significant scholarly challenge. Therefore, given the nature of this paper, a selective approach was adopted, limiting the analysis to several representative works reflecting the principal directions of his scholarly interests. Consequently, the study focuses on highlighting the Professor's most significant scientific achievements, emphasizing his contribution to the development of the psychiatric care system within the Polish Armed Forces, and underscoring his role as a mentor and authority for many generations of physicians.

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia sylwetkę profesora Stanisława Ilnickiego, wybitnego specjalisty w dziedzinie psychiatrii wojskowej, uznawanego za jej nestora w Polsce. Był on inicjatorem krajowych badań nad stresem bojowym oraz jednym z twórców systemu pomocy psychologicznej dla żołnierzy, obejmującego zarówno uczestników misji zagranicznych, jak i weteranów służby wojskowej. Dorobek naukowy Profesora obejmuje setki publikacji i wystąpień, dokumentujących jego zainteresowania badawcze oraz praktyczne zaangażowanie w rozwój psychiatrii wojskowej, przede wszystkim w wymiarze klinicznym i dydaktycznym. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest przedstawienie dorobku naukowego i wdrożeniowego Stanisława Ilnickiego we wszystkich obszarach jego działalności. Zadanie to, ze względu na rozległość i różnorodność osiągnięć, stanowi jednak istotne wyzwanie badawcze, dlatego z uwagi na charakter artykułu dokonano selekcji materiału, ograniczając analizę do kilkunastu prac reprezentatywnych dla głównych nurtów jego zainteresowań. W konsekwencji opracowanie koncentruje się na ukazaniu najważniejszych osiągnięć naukowych Profesora, podkreśleniu jego wkładu w rozwój systemu opieki psychiatrycznej w Polskich Siłach Zbrojnych oraz wskazaniu jego roli jako mentora i autorytetu dla wielu pokoleń lekarzy.

Keywords: Polish psychiatrist; Stanisław Ilnicki; military psychiatry; combat stress

Słowa kluczowe: polscy psychiatrzy; Stanisław Ilnicki; psychiatria wojskowa; stres bojowy

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It was with profound sadness that we received the news of the passing of Dr. Stanisław Ilnicki, MD, PhD, professor at the Military Institute of Medicine - National Research Institute and an outstanding military psychiatrist, valued scientist, dedicated educator, and humanist. Dr. Stanisław Ilnicki was a physician by vocation and a man of extraordinary sensitivity. He devoted his life to serving others, particularly those affected by trauma and suffering. His professional and scientific work left a lasting mark on Polish psychiatry, particularly in military care. He is regarded as the founder of Polish military psychiatry in the field of combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a pioneer of combat stress research in Poland, and a co-creator of the mental health support system within the Polish Armed Forces (Fig. 1).

Stanisław Ilnicki was born on May 8, 1942, in Klesów, Volhynia. After the war, his family settled on the coast. He began his schooling in Łębork and, in 1959, passed his A-levels at King Jan III Sobieski High School in Wejherowo, to which he remained emotionally attached throughout his life. He started his studies at the Jagiellonian University but, after one year, transferred to the Military Medical Academy in Łódź, graduating with distinction in 1966 as the top student in his class. His need for a deeper understanding of human nature is further evidenced by his completion of philosophy studies at the University of Warsaw in 1972. Philosophy became an important foundation for his understanding of humanity and his work as a physician. In 1978, he defended his



Figure 1. Stanisław Ilnicki (from the WIM-PIB archives)

doctoral dissertation on predicting adaptation to military service, and in 2000, he obtained a postdoctoral degree.

He began his professional career at the Military Institute of Medicine-National Research Institute (WIM-PIB) in Warsaw, the successor to and continuation of the former Central Clinical Hospital of the Military Medical Academy (CSK WAM) [1]. After obtaining specialization in psychiatry between 1971 and 1973, he worked at the Mental Health Clinic (PZP) for many years, where he earned the respect of both patients and colleagues. In 1980, he became head of the Clinic and later took over the management of the Day Psychiatric Ward.

As a physician, he distinguished himself by an approach based on empathy and respect. Rather focusing on the symptoms alone, he sought to understand people in the full complexity of their experiences. Managing the clinic provided the foundation for establishing a specialized PTSD treatment centre. After nearly four decades of dedicated work, in 2005 he led the establishment of the Clinic of Psychiatry, Combat Stress and Psychotraumatology at the Military Institute of Medicine-National Research Institute [2], which he subsequently headed. It was one of the first centres in Poland to provide comprehensive PTSD therapy, particularly for veterans of foreign missions and their families. For many patients, the Clinic became a place of support and understanding. The centre also provided psychiatric and psychological care for Polish Army soldiers experiencing symptoms of PTSD, as well as to their close ones and other victims, including victims of terrorist attacks.

He became known within the military community as “the doctor who patched up soldiers’ souls”, a nickname that best reflected both the nature of his work and his relationships with patients.

In parallel, he conducted scientific research, also in the field of forensic psychiatry, collaborating with institutions involved in the investigation and prevention of crime.

The Professor’s scientific achievements, encompassing hundreds of publications and scientific presentations documenting both his research interests and his practical contributions to the development of military psychiatry, were primarily clinical and educational in nature. The establishment of the Clinic of Psychiatry and Combat Stress at the Military Institute of Medicine, as well as the development of a model for the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD in soldiers, the prevention of combat stress, and the provision of care to veterans were his most important scientific contributions.

The Professor’s research interests focused on key areas of psychiatry, particularly those related to contemporary experiences, stress, and the psychological consequences of military service.

His key contribution to the development of military psychiatry included research on the epidemiology of mental disorders in the military environment, particularly the mental health of soldiers returning from foreign deployments.

A significant achievement was his scientific editorship of the Polish edition of the monograph *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management*, the first comprehensive Polish-language publication devoted to the psychological effects of combat exposure. The publication was intended for specialists providing mental care to soldiers and veterans of the Polish Military Contingents (PMC) as well as their family members.

The results of research conducted within the project "The Impact of Individual Characteristics and Family Structure on the Adaptability of Polish Military Contingent (PMC) Veterans to Socio-Professional Functioning After Mission Completion" also found practical application. They were used in war trauma psychotherapy, including PTSD in PMC veterans. The study was the first attempt in Poland to assess the impact of deployment and combat exposure on family relationships and marital communication among PMC veterans [4–6].

Another study evaluating the efficacy of psychotherapy in PMC veterans with PTSD demonstrated, among other findings, that no single universal therapeutic approach exists and that treatment strategies used in NATO armies cannot be directly transferred to Poland. The clinical picture of PTSD is complex, requiring individualized diagnosis, a prolonged diagnostic process, and the management of specific barriers to effective therapy. Effective treatment often requires family involvement, combining various psychotherapeutic strategies with pharmacotherapy, and consideration of co-occurring physical injuries and somatic symptoms that may mask PTSD [7, 8].

The professor also initiated systematic research for the Ministry of National Defence, focusing on the psychological effects of military service. The epidemiological significance of this research primarily lay in determining the prevalence of mental disorders in a specific professional group, identifying risk factors associated with military deployment, and highlighting the underestimation of the problem arising from the stigmatization of individuals struggling with mental health issues [9–11].

He presented the results of his scientific research and experience gained in clinical practice in professional journals and at numerous national and international conferences, including NATO workshops on PTSD.

The professor's earlier research interests focused largely on medical examinations and qualifications for military service, including the assessment of military fitness among conscripts and soldiers, military medical examinations, and forensic psychiatric expertise. His theoretical work in this field included, among other topics, the assessment of suicide in military compensation proceedings, the analysis of the causal relationship between neurosis, schizophrenia, and encephalopathy and military service, as well as the issue of disability among professional soldiers deemed unfit for service [12–18].

The Professor's interests further included issues related to the diagnosis and psychiatric care of soldiers, with a focus on ongoing medical care and psychological support. The need for psychological support for soldiers was overlooked by state and military authorities for many

post-war years. Until 1994, Poland lacked a comprehensive legal framework for mental healthcare; these matters were addressed only fragmentarily through scattered regulations. Only the Mental Health Protection Act [19] comprehensively regulated the rights of psychiatric patients, the principles of compulsory treatment, and the organization of care. It also became a reference point for psychiatric reforms in the military health service [20]. These issues constituted a significant part of the professor's clinical and scientific work. The conclusions from the research, including those concerning the prevention of adjustment disorders in soldiers and the analysis of the Act in terms of organizational changes in mental health care, were submitted to the Ministry of National Defence and provided a basis for creating a military psychologist position. The professor's work became the starting point for developing military implementing regulations [21–25]. He also participated in the team responsible for preparing materials for the Minister of National Defence. This work contributed to the decision to organize psychoprophylactic activities within the Armed Forces. The practical outcome was the employment of approximately 120 psychologists in the military, serving as consultants to unit commanders on psychoprophylactic matters.

Prevention and management of alcohol-related problems in the military population, which he encountered daily while working at the Mental Health Clinic, was equally important area of the Professor's work. While conducting research on alcohol dependence among soldiers, he focused on the effectiveness of outpatient therapy, particularly in settings with limited access to inpatient treatment. His work also focused on adapting established international therapeutic models to the realities of the Polish healthcare system. Of particular importance was the evaluation of the efficacy of outpatient treatment for alcohol dependence based on the Minnesota Model, which combines psychotherapy, the Twelve-Step Program [26], and group therapy. Analyses conducted in a sample of patients at the Mental Health Clinic demonstrated that this model can be used in an outpatient setting, which had significant practical implications given the limited resources of the healthcare system [26, 27].

As a distinguished specialist in his field, he also provided numerous psychiatric and psychological consultations to patients in other clinics at the Military Institute of Medicine. In the 1990s, he initiated collaboration with the Haematology Clinic and the Center of Bone Marrow Transplant at the Central Clinical Hospital of the Military Medical Academy. This collaboration resulted in publications and conference presentations highlighting the importance of psychological and psychiatric support during bone marrow transplantation and chemotherapy for haematological malignancies.

Works on the history of psychiatry and military psychology in Poland and other countries constitute a significant part of his scientific output [28]. These papers addressed:

- the history of military health service,
- the development of military psychiatry in Poland,
- biographies of important military doctors,
- editing and translation of old medical texts.



Figure 2. Stanisław Ilnicki, winner of the Director's Award for organizational achievements, 2016 (from the WIM-PIB archives)



Figure 3. Stanisław Ilnicki, scientific presentation at the conference on September 30, 2025, Warsaw (from the WIM-PIB archives)

Among the Professor's achievements, the Polish translation of Antoni Schneeberger's *De bona militum valetudine conservanda liber, the oldest modern military hygiene manual*, a book on maintaining good health for soldiers, deserves particular mention [29]. He worked on this publication for approximately 15 years. The introduction, translation, footnotes, and indexes were prepared by Professor Ilnicki. The Latin text and translation were edited by Dr. Robert A. Sucharski, MD, PhD.

His passion for the history of psychiatry is also evidenced by the extensive work he devoted to the development and publication of the *Bibliography of Scientific Works in the Field of Military Psychiatry and Related Fields of Psychology for the Years 1940–1970* [30]. In addition to his professional work and numerous responsibilities, the Professor continually upgraded his qualifications by completing internships in Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and other countries. He also served as a consultant in psychiatry for the Military Health Service and was also a member and activist of the Polish Society of Forensic Psychiatry and the Polish Society for Traumatic Stress Research.

Teaching was an important part of his work. He sought to impart to young physicians not only knowledge and experience but also a strong work ethic grounded in responsibility, commitment, and service to others.

In 2011, the Professor received the “Buzdygan” award for his lifetime achievement, presented by the editorial staff of the magazine “Polska Zbrojna,” and in 2020, he received the prestigious Pro Publico Bono award. His work was also recognized on numerous occasions by the Director of the Military Institute of Medicine for his organizational, scientific, and implementation achievements. The laudations emphasized his passion for psychiatry, military service, and the history of military healthcare (Fig. 2).

He worked actively almost until the end of his life, despite being retired for many years. His last scientific presentation was devoted to the contemporary mental health crises in the Polish Army at a conference held on September 30, 2025 (Fig. 3). He passed away on October 24, 2025.

Professor Stanisław Ilnicki will be remembered as a physician who combined concern for patients' mental health with respect for their dignity.

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