Ottorino Rossi was born on 17th January, 1877, in Solbiate, near Como. He studied at the "Collegio Ghislieri" and in 1895 enrolled at the medical faculty of the University of Pavia. In October 1902 he went on to the Center for Mental and Nervous Diseases of Pavia directed by Casimiro Mondino. In the academic year 1925-26 he succeeded Camillo Golgi as rector of the University of Pavia. He was the author of major scientific works including "The Arteriosclerosis of the Nervous System" and other studies giving a new interpretation of the development of lesions of vascular origin. He died in 1936 at the age of 59, having named the "Collegio Ghislieri" as his heir.

In previous years the Ottorino Rossi Award has been conferred upon: Vittorio Erspamer, Rome, Italy (1990); Paolo Pinelli, Milan, Italy (1991); Giovanni Di Chiuro, Bethesda, USA (1992); Claudio J. Gibbs Jr, Bethesda, USA (1993); J. Gibbs (1994); Michel Fardeau, Paris, France (1996); Salvador Moncada, London, UK (1997); Alain Berthoz, Paris, France (1998); Otta Sjaastad, Trondheim, Norway (1999); J. Timothy Greenamyre, Atlanta, USA (2000); Salvatore DiMauro, New York, USA (2001); Elia Raviola, Boston, USA (2002); Kenneth Michael A. Welch, Chicago, USA (2003). This year, the IRCCS Foundation “C. Mondino Institute of Neurology” has conferred the award on Professor François Boller, Research Director at the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM) in Paris, France. The awarding committee was composed of: Orso Bugiani, Board Member, Italian Association of Brain Aging; Alberto Calligaro, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Pavia; Carlo Caltagirone, President of the Italian Society of Neurogeriatrics; Vittorio Cosi, Director of the School of Specialisation in Neurology, University of Pavia; Stefano Govoni, Director of the Department of Experimental and Applied Pharmacology, University of Pavia; Corra-do Messina, President of the Italian Society of Neurology; Amigo Moglia, Director of the Department of Neurological Sciences, University of Pavia; Giuseppe Nappi, Scientific Director, IRCCS C. Mondino Institute of Neurology, Pavia; Paolo Nichelli, Director of the Neurology Unit, Department of Neurosciences - T.C.R., University of Modena and Reggio Emilia; Roberto Schmid, Rector of the University of Pavia and President of IRCCS C. Mondino Institute of Neurology, Pavia; PierFranco Spano, editor-in-chief Functional Neurology. Secretary of the Award: Elena Sinforiani, Head of the Laboratory of Neuropsychology, IRCCS C. Mondino Institute of Neurology, Pavia.

François Boller was born in Montreux, Switzerland, to a French father and an Italian mother. At the age of 14, he moved with his family to Cremona, where he attended the Ginnasio-Liceo Daniele Manin, obtaining his “Maturità” (Italian high school diploma) in 1957. He then started his medical studies in Bologna. During his third year, he decided to undertake some research in neurophysiology, while still continuing his medical studies. He therefore moved to the University of Pisa, where he had been accepted as Student Intern by Professor Giovanni Moruzzi. He spent the next three years (1960-1963) as part of a team directed by Emilio Bizzi, now Professor of Psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These were very exciting years. REM sleep had just been discovered and Pisa, together with Palo Alto and Lyon, was one of the few centres where active research in that field was being carried out.

François Boller obtained his medical degree summa cum laude in 1963, presenting a thesis on the activity of the lateral geniculate nucleus of the cat during REM sleep, which earned him a special Silver Medal. However, by this time, he had decided that he preferred to work with humans rather than with cats. Having met Professor Ennio De Renzi some time earlier, he moved to Milan to the Clinica delle Malattie Nervose e Mentali, directed by Professor Gildo Gastaldi, where he specialized in neurology. Both Gastaldi and De Renzi had, through Carlo Berlucchi (University of Pavia) and Romolo Rossini (University of Modena) respectively, been pupils of Ottorino Rossi’s Pavia school of neurology.

For the next three years he was an active member of what became known as the Milan group, working with Ennio De Renzi, Luigi A. Vignolo, Hans Spinner, Piero Faglioni and others. He obtained his specialization diploma in 1966, summa cum laude. His thesis, directed by Luigi Vignolo, dealt with an analysis of naming impairment in aphasia. This was the first of a series of studies on aphasia and related disorders. His subsequent publications on several aspects of auditory comprehension in aphasia, including the first quantitative study on the Token Test, as well as his investigation on acalculia (with Jordan Grafman) are now considered classic papers.
In 1967, Professor Norman Geschwind invited him to join the Boston Aphasia Group. Thus, he moved to Boston University and V.A. Hospital, where he completed a full residency in neurology followed by a research fellowship. During those years he worked in close contact not only with neurologists such as Frank Benson and Martin Albert, but also with psychologists such as Harold Goodglass and Edith Kaplan and with speech pathologists, who all together made up an outstanding and highly innovative team of investigators in neuropsychology. At that time he completed work on the clinicopathological and imaging correlates of attention as measured by reaction times. He was one of the first to demonstrate a functional asymmetry and a different role of the two hemispheres in attention tasks.

He then had the opportunity to become a member of the Neurology Service at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU), directed by Professor Joseph Foley. Teaching has always been a high priority for François Boller and one of his proudest achievements is his nomination as Teacher of the Year at CWRU in 1978. He was named Associate Professor and created a Neurobehavior Unit where he continued his clinical research. In 1974 he was asked to replace Dr Foley at a meeting on the Neurology of Aging which was attended by doctors Katzman, Terry, Tomlinson and Buschke. This seemingly fortuitous event was in fact his first introduction to what was to become his main field of research.

In 1977, Dr Boller took a sabbatical year in Paris at the INSERM Unit directed by Professor Henry Hécaen. His research at that time set the stage for his future work on Parkinson disease (PD). He published the battery known as Boller-Hécaen's battery.

Back in Cleveland he worked with Pierluigi Gambetti on the overlap between PD and Alzheimer disease and on the whole gamut of the cognitive changes that accompany PD. He also attended and gave courses at the University's Department of Psychology and, in 1982, obtained a PhD in experimental psychology.

In 1979, he joined the University of Pittsburgh as Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry. He created the United States' sixth Alzheimer Disease Research Center (there are now about 40). While in Pittsburgh, his research focused on different aspects of Alzheimer disease, in particular its very early phase and its advanced stage, including its clinicopathological correlates. With Judy Saxton, he developed the Severe Impairment Battery now used in many countries to quantify the cognitive abilities of patients with advanced dementia.

In 1986 he was called upon to found and direct an INSERM Unit in Paris, aimed at studying the neuropsychology and neurobiology of cerebral aging. Under his direction, the Unit has become a point of reference for research on various aspects of dementia and cognition, such as memory (with Gianfranco Dalla Barba), language (with Marie Claire Goldblum), visuospatial behavior (with Paolo Bartolomeo) and the medical and psychiatric aspects of Alzheimer disease (with Françoise Forette).

In addition to his research, François Boller has done much to disseminate knowledge in the fields of neurology and neuropsychology and has been, and still is, very active in international organizations. He chairs the Publications and Website Committee of the World Federation of Neurology and has been Secretary-Treasurer of the Research Group on Dementia for many years. He is the Founding Editor and current Editor-in-Chief of the European Journal of Neurology. Together with Jordan Grafman, he has been in charge of two editions of the Handbook of Neuropsychology. He has recently undertaken, together with doctors Aminoff and Swaab, the editorship of the Handbook of Clinical Neurology (formerly edited by Vinken and Bruyn).

François Boller's career has led him to different countries, and from one center of excellence to another. Throughout this itinerary, he has succeeded in maintaining a remarkably coherent approach to his research. In all the scientific environments in which he has worked, and in all the topics he has chosen to investigate – focal brain damaged patients, diffuse brain damaged patients, aging people, etc. – the tool of his research has always been a sound neuropsychological method, coupling clinical acumen in formulating hypotheses with rigorous standardized assessment procedures and inferential statistics in putting them to the test.

The Ottorino Rossi Award for 2004 is bestowed on Professor François Boller in acknowledgment both of his valuable contribution to understanding of hitherto hidden aspects of brain-behavior relationships and of his unrelenting activity as a teacher, editor, and promoter of international endeavors in the fields of neurology and neuropsychology.