

IN MEMÓRIAM

Juan Luis González Cerna (1927-2013)

In 2013, the Hospital Infantil de México Federico Gómez (HIMFG) received the sad news of the passing of one of its “favorite sons.” Juan Luis González Cerna was born in Mexico City on April 10, 1927. He earned his medical degree from the Faculty of Medicine, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and trained as a pediatrician and pediatric surgeon at the HIMFG, developing the technical skills and agile academic thinking that characterized his personality.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the specialty of pediatric cardiac surgery would attract Dr. González Cerna. This was an emerging specialty that, in 1954, only 2 years previously had been introduced in Minneapolis, Minnesota by Dr. C.W. Lillehei and at the neighboring Mayo Clinic by Dr. J. Kirklin. To achieve the repair of congenital heart anomalies via direct visualization, Dr. Lillehei had originally used cross-circulation with the patient’s father acting as oxygenator. Subsequently, Dr. Lillehei and Dr. Kirklin opted for the use of the cardiopulmonary bypass pump.

In 1956, Dr. González Cerna was accepted to train with Dr. Lillehei along with a large group of future great cardiovascular surgeons including Vincent Goth, Norman Shumway, Christiaan Barnard and, later on, Aldo Castañeda, all witnesses and participants of the initiation of Pediatric Cardiovascular Surgery.

Upon his return to Mexico, in order to develop the precise technology of circulatory arrest with extracorporeal



circulation in the environment of the HIMFG without the support of a sophisticated group such as the one in Minneapolis, Dr. González Cerna had to test the method in dozens of dogs and was assisted by a notable pediatric surgeon, Dr. Berkowski, while at the same time training his first perfusionist, Ms. Nora Cobos. Only until he mastered the complex procedure to his complete satisfaction along with the support of an excellent anesthesiologist, Dr. Stella Melman, did he initiate heart surgery for the correction of pediatric cardiac diseases in 1962.

As his clinical counterpart since 1966, the author was able to appreciate the technical accuracy

of Dr. González Cerna’s interventions, preceded by a thorough and critical analysis of the diagnosis and management options followed by a total dedication to the patient’s postoperative care for days or weeks to achieve survival with minimal morbidity. At this stage he was inflexible and demanding of all personnel of their maximum commitment. Following this, the first “human monitor” appeared, taking patients’ vital signs every 5-15 min in the recovery room. These were the “unfortunate” residents of Pediatrics and Pediatric Surgery who rotated through this service. Many of them remember Dr. González Cerna as tough, demanding, even rough, while at the same time standing close, almost exhausted, at the bedside of a sick child. Through the years almost all of the students of Dr. González Cerna will admit that their training was positively influenced by an exemplary teacher.

The greatest merit of Dr. Gonzalez Cerna was to demonstrate that, even without a highly trained team or the advanced support systems in use at the time, children could survive and so they did.

From the HIMFG came the first successful heart surgery series in Mexico. Over the years, Cardiovascular Surgery and Pediatric Cardiology have inexorably advanced. When, in 1970, the long desired correction of heart disease in the neonate and infant using the radical technique of deep hypothermia was finally achieved, it was then possible to repair very small hearts under direct vision. Always interested in applying innovative procedures, Dr. Gonzalez Cerna traveled to New Zealand during the 1970s to learn the complex method from one of its greatest exponents, Sir B.G. Barratt-Boyes.

Upon his return to HIMFG, Dr. Gonzalez Cerna operated the first neonatal cases, correcting their cardiac malformations, including some of great complexity.

For these achievements the recognition from various societies and academies was inevitable. In 1992, Dr. Gonzalez Cerna was awarded the “Eduardo Liceaga” medal that Mexico grants to its most distinguished profession-

als. Despite his personal successes, he never changed his qualities of honesty and modest demeanor.

I personally should say that the identity of our departments, Cardiovascular Surgery and Pediatric Cardiology, made us faithful companions, mutually respectful of the achievements and tolerant over failures that inevitably occur in the prolonged practice of such a demanding specialty.

Surprisingly, Dr. Gonzalez Cerna said farewell to the turbulence of the operating room in 1999, choosing during the summers the quiet of the plains of Minnesota, the home of his beloved wife Joyce, while in the cold weather he opted for the warm beaches of Culiacan, Sinaloa where his daughter Marcela lives. During this last winter this tireless, prolific, great surgeon reached eternal peace.

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