Dr. Manuel Velasco Suarez

In Memoriam

Prof. Manuel Velasco Suarez, México City, died December 2, 2001. Not only was he a pioneer of Stereotactic Neurosurgery in Mexico, who was awarded the WSSFN Spiegel-Wycis Medal 1985, but he had an illustrious history in public service, serving as Governor of the State of Chiapas, and as leading member of the 'Doctors for the Prevention of the Nuclear War' when the group was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Dr. Velasco Suarez was an exceptional man, endowed with exceptional talent, brilliant intelligence, and particular personal qualities. He was the creator of the National Institute of Neurology and Neurosurgery of Mexico, as well as other Institutions of Health and of Education. He was an organizer and promoter of activities in the bioethical and humanistic fields, which gave clear evidence of his interest in reaching peace and justice both in his country and in the world.

Dr. Velasco Suarez was born a native of the City of San Cristobal de la Casas, a small town in the State of Chiapas, Mexico, in 1914, into an honorable family of illustrious ancestry. His father was a lawyer. He attended the local school and carried out his first studies, where his humanitarian feelings began to develop as he observed the deprivations of the people with whom he was in close contact. Later he moved to Mexico City to study Medicine at the National University, where he graduated with honors. His dynamic manner and eloquent speaking ability, as well as his interest in human and social problems, identified him early as a student leader.

In 1941 and 1942 he completed his training in neurology and neurosurgery in Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, under the guidance of Jason Mixter, James B. Ayer and James C. White, and in 1943 in Washington, D.C., with Walter Freeman and James W. Watts.

On his return to Mexico City he became Professor and Chief of Neurosurgery in the Hospital Juarez, where he reorganized the teaching programs and the patient care.

In 1954 he was instrumental in the foundation of the Mexican Society of Neurological Surgery, of which he was President in 1957 and 1958. Prof. Velasco Suarez always sought the integration of Mexican Neurosurgery into the inter-

national environment, achieving academic relationships with the most select scientific programs of North and South America, as well as with Europe and many other countries, and with the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies, where he served for many years as the Delegate from Mexico. He maintained a cordial friendship with many of the most illustrious neurosurgeons of the world, as well as with outstanding people devoted to humanistic activities.

He had a special interest and dedication for patients with epilepsy, and pioneered depth electrode recording from the temporal lobe and the resection of the amygdala through open surgery, and later the refinement of such surgery with stereotactic procedures. In stereotactic neurosurgery, he published as early as 1957 on pallidotomy in the treatment of Parkinson disease, using an Encephalotome apparatus of his personal design. In 1970 he injected through stereotactic surgery local atropine initially and later L-dopa, which could be considered the first in site implantation of neurotransmitters into the basal ganglia. He published numerous papers in psychosurgery, presenting results and indications to select patients ethically.

Dr. Velasco Suarez published hundreds of articles and book chapters, and was also editor of valuable publications in neurosurgery, bioethics and matters concerning the scientific responsibility of the neurosurgeon. His productivity with papers concerning both medical and humanistic issues was prodigious, as we can see in the partial compilation of his publications in his book 'Humanism and Scientific Thought', which consisted of four volumes with 3900 pages.

He was member of more than a hundred national and international scientific and academic societies. He presided over countless congresses and scientific and social meetings, always with active participation in their organization. The distinctions that deservedly have been granted were very numerous.

His contribution in teaching was recognized by the National University, who named him Emeritus Professor and granted the Gold Medal of University Merit. He received the Medal of Honor for neurosurgical merit in Toronto, Canada, in 1985, as the highest distinction granted by the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies. He also received the gold Medal Sixto Obrador of the Instituto Ramon y Cajal of Madrid, Spain in 1984. He received the Spiegel-Wycis Medal from the World Society of Stereotactic and Functional Neurosurgery in 1985. This was a particularly deserved recognition, since he had designed and produced at his own expense the original medal made from solid gold. The Medal of the Humanitarian Award of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons was awarded to Prof. Velasco Suarez in 1993. He received honoris causa doctor degrees of several Universities of Mexico and the Thomas Jefferson University of Philadelphia, and was an honorary member of numerous foreign institutions. He was nominated among the '17 Sages from the End of the XX Century', in Mexico.

During his official position at the Health Ministry in Mexico, Dr. Velasco Suarez looked after the well-being and the health of patients and the delivery of

their best medical care. He devoted great effort to the organization and creation of institutions, such as neuropsychiatric outpatient departments in Hospitals in Mexico City and six states of the Republic, improvement and then substitution of the General Asylum, and he created in the country a chain of local 'Farm hospitals' in Tlalpan, Zoguiapan, Tabasco, Hermosillo, Oaxaca, Tepexpan, and a series of Rehabilitation Centers in Mexico City and in Villahermosa.

However, among his institutional activities, the greatest was the creation of the National Institute of Neurology and Neurosurgery, of which he said at one time 'may be the biggest and dearest contribution in my professional life'. The Institute included all branches of the sciences of the nervous system, including neurology, psychiatry and neurosurgery, organized as inseparable central basic trunks, so the related specialties might work to fulfill the integrated care of the patients. This was organized together with research, education and training of personnel at all levels, so doctors, nurses, and technicians might have consolidated teaching programs. Hundreds of doctors have been educated and today are distributed throughout the country and abroad, and occupy positions of responsibility, with many of them recognized professors.

Besides his professional medical activities, but connected to his deeply human spirit, he had an active political life and was elected Governor of his home State of Chiapas from 1970 to 1976. As an example of his dedication, Dr. Velasco Suarez strove to improve all aspects of human life, including education. Several hospitals, health centers, and technological institutes were created, with programs integrated for the social, educational and economic development of the indigenous groups. He had special impact on the humanitarian and cultural level of the state when he founded the University of Chiapas.

Dr. Velasco Suarez participated in associations that fought for peace and against the danger of nuclear war, as president of the Mexican Chapter of the International Organization of Doctors for the Prevention of the Nuclear War. He and his associates in this endeavor were distinguished in 1985 with the honorable award of the Nobel Peace Prize by the Norwegian Parliament, which reflected to a great extent the activities of Dr. Velasco Suarez.

In more recent years, his thoughts and actions were in the field of bioethics. From the offices of the National Commission of Bioethics and of the Mexican Academy of Bioethics, he promoted among the medical community the importance of bioethical principles, and he wrote the very advanced 'Bioethical Code-Guide of Professional Behavior'. We can say that all the achievements in Dr. Velasco Suarez' life, both in medical and social aspects, were always framed within a humanitarian philosophy of help to the human being, sick or healthy, a philosophy of service to society demonstrated by action and summed up in his works.

The combination of talent and dynamism, with applied practical execution, in a man about whom was written in life by his colleague Dr. Kumate on a certain

occasion, 'When young a distinguished student, in maturity a visionary medical leader, now and always a sage, of clean cradle, an authentic Christian, teacher and generous preceptor'. I might add, he was a valiant and integral man, head of an exemplary family, endowed with exceptional qualities and singular medical talent. His actions and achievements had an outstanding role in the advancement of medicine and neurosurgery in Mexico, for which he was acknowledged to be one of the most valuable resources in Mexican medical science. He was a tenacious fighter for the highest universal principles of humanity, health, education, peace and justice.

His tireless energy and enthusiasm are legendary among those who met him. As a person, it would be important to point out some of his particular characteristics, as he possessed great perceptive qualities, was an acute observer and analyzed everything. He had a prodigious memory for facts and events, and bigger still for people, to retain their names and their environments, their likes and their interests, with which he fulfilled an interest to foment human relationships.

Dr. Velasco Suarez slept little and was a fond reader of science, history and humanities, that enriched his great wealth of information. He was a great conversationalist, always with an intensity that maintained the speaker's attention, so that repeatedly his colleagues were impressed.

In his personal life, it must be noted that he maintained an exemplary family, in concert with his wife, Elvira, a devoted partner with whom they had eleven children. The oldest was Jose Manuel, a medical doctor with neurosurgical training in the National Institute of Neurology and Neurosurgery, Mexico, and in pediatric neurosurgery in Chicago. Jose Manuel's premature death, together with the death of Dr. Velasco Suarez' wife and his daughter Lupita, constituted hard blows in his life, that he overcame, thanks to his strength and deeply Christian spirit, and to his determination of character.

He left us the example of all his actions and in all the positions he occupied, which included Professor, Neurosurgeon, Founder and President of the Mexican Society of Neurological Surgery, Official of the Health Ministry, Creator of Institutions, Governor of his home state, Mexican deeply interested in serving his homeland and society, fighter for peace, enemy of nuclear war, promoter of the highest values in bioethics.

The passing of Dr. Velasco Suarez at 87 years, as a result of a multiple organ failure that he suffered during his last three months, could be said to be before his time, because he continued to maintain full intellectual activity, with incredible lucidity and elegance in speaking. He still had a lot to offer with his experience and wisdom. In all activities and achievements that he left, we find alive his ideals, and we can find a piece of his essence, that he left with each one of those who ever met him.

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