

Obituary

Dr. Fernando Ortiz-Monastario



The world is poorer today with the passing away of Fernando Ortiz-Monastario, an outstanding teacher, skilled surgeon, commanding orator, keen researcher and a very kind and loving human being. He and Paul Tessier were the pioneers in the world of craniofacial surgery and his loss has left the specialty truly poor. The social relevance which he gave to his surgical prowess truly made him a leader in his field as he stood head and shoulders above the rest. The beloved patriarch whose demands for excellence from his subordinates only matched his grandfatherly love for the poor children with craniofacial disorders, left for his heavenly abode on November 2, 2012, at his residence in Mexico City at the young age of 89.

Born in 1923, Fernando Ortiz-Monastario attended university in Mexico City and proceeded to the United States for higher education. He returned home in the 1950s and was one of the first plastic surgeons of Mexico. He worked all his life for the Ministry of Health in Mexico and established our specialty in Central America. He was affiliated with the Graduate Division of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México when the division of Plastic Surgery began in General Hospital of Mexico in 1960.

At this time craniofacial surgery was in its infancy as a specialty and was being developed by the French surgeon Paul Tessier. Prior to Ortiz-Monasterio's return from the U.S., children with craniofacial abnormalities in Mexico were left untreated. Around this time the two surgeons began to learn about each other's work starting what would become an enduring and everlasting relationship of friendship and mutual respect. As Tessier received

more and more complex cases he would ask the Mexican surgeon to fly to Paris over the weekend so they could operate together. This helped both to enhance their techniques and each time they would discover ways to improve their results and thus augment their experience in this young and growing field.

This association prompted Ortiz-Monasterio to recruit his own craniofacial team in Mexico. Once a team of surgeons, orthodontists, speech therapists, nurses and other specialties had been assembled, craniofacial operations began in Mexico. All this work cost money but was not deemed big enough problem to warrant financial support from the government. The future of this surgery in Mexico therefore became a self-funded scheme and Dr. Ortiz-Monasterio would perform non-craniofacial plastic surgery including a lot of rhinoplasties, working almost 100 hours a week to fund his passion for craniofacial surgery! Over the years, the Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Hospital General Gea Gonzalez—with its professionalism, capacity for innovation, quality and compassion became a national and international reference point, the quiet pride of Mexico, thanks to the lifelong dedication of Dr. Ortiz-Monasterio.

Any visitor to his unit would be fully convinced that healthcare can be affordable, humane and excellent, that even the very poor can receive the best medical care at costs that do not bankrupt healthcare systems and that every one of us deserve a face with which we can bravely meet the world. His hospital General Gea Gonzalez, located in Mexico City's frenetic Tlalpan district, is surrounded by a high metal-barred fence, its entrances guarded by policemen carrying automatic weapons. On any day, literally thousands of impoverished Mexicans wait patiently for services, often for many hours, yet the hospital's plastic and reconstructive surgery unit is also what Dr. Fernando Ortiz-Monasterio, called "the most exciting clinic in the world, the only place I want to be."

Ortiz-Monasterio pioneered surgical advances including the complete monobloc osteotomy used to advance

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the frontal bone, orbits and midface as one unit. The most telling sign of his modesty was his decision not to write the first book on craniofacial surgery until Tessier had done so. Despite having a wealth of cases and experiences which would have been more than enough to produce the first definitive book on craniofacial surgery, he believed Tessier deserved that honor. In his book on Rhinoplasty he presents a step-by-step account of the techniques – each procedure is nicely illustrated with long-term photographic follow-ups. A Mecca for craniofacial surgery training, his unit was responsible for training over 250 overseas fellows and boasts of a library of over 7000 books including a copy of Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* from 1543!

Not only will Ortiz-Monasterio be remembered for his hugely generous contributions to plastic surgery, but what makes him unique is his voracious appetite to discover more about the historical, cultural and sociological implications of his work. In the early days many patients were unaware that this type of surgery was available and Ortiz-Monasterio wanted to change this. Craving a broader understanding of the problems and causes of craniofacial abnormalities, he embarked on rural expeditions with his mobile treatment facility and would recruit history, anthropology and sociology students to accompany him. They interviewed patients and families in an effort to build a historical record with their findings and their results point to causes which are now more widely known. Superstitions and beliefs in divine retribution as well as parental indifference all contributed to leaving thousands of children untreated in rural communities across his country. Ortiz-Monasterio's belief in the importance of cultural awareness is such that he would organize evening trips for his residents around some of Mexico's largest museums to discuss the murals of Riviera and the artwork in the Museum of Medicine.

It was a life of adventure and ambition which introduced plastic surgery and most notably craniofacial surgery to Mexico and Central America. When we will attempt

to write the history of craniofacial surgery, it will be impossible to do so without taking into account his exploits. His lifelong commitment to plastic surgery, and the fact that he chose to cater his services to the poorest of the poor without any other reward or remunerations except the smiles and gratitude of his patients and their relatives will be the subject of folklore in Mexico in the days to come.

He was a dedicated skier and tennis player, a voracious reader and a literary scholar with interests ranging from history and anthropology to art and music. His spirit is best conserved in the faces his patients are proud to show to the world today. A documentary film *Beautiful Faces* interweaves the stories of patients and their families who come to the reconstructive plastic surgery unit at Hospital Gea Gonzalez seeking physical transformations that will renew their own and their loved one's lives with the personal stories of the enormously talented medical professionals whose work is both their passion and their gift to humankind. The film chronicles the remarkable community of caregivers and care-receivers who come together on the hospital's fascinating fourth floor, and who profoundly influence each others lives. *Beautiful Faces* is a mosaic of stories – the richly visual tales of people who meet in a singular place and who collectively understand that in valuing individual lives and striving to make them better, we value all of humanity.

This is the spirit of Fernando Ortiz-Monasterio, which will always remain in our memories!

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