

Icon of this issue

Dr. Fernando Ortiz-Monasterio



Dr. Fernando Ortiz-Monasterio (1923-2012)

Fernando Ortiz-Monasterio was an outstanding teacher, a skilled surgeon, a commanding orator, a keen researcher and a very kind and loving human being. He and Paul Tessier were the pioneers in the world of cranio-facial surgery. 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. This beloved patriarch, whose demands for excellence from his subordinates only matched his grand fatherly love for the poor children with cranio-facial disorders changed the life of so many he touched that today when we look back at the body of work he has left behind, it is hard to believe that all this was done by one man, or for that matter.....one superman!

Born in 1923 Fernando Ortiz-Monasterio 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 the speciality of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery 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 speciality 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. Two surgeons who could think out of the box, complemented each other and produced magic on a regular basis.

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 a 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-cranio facial Plastic Surgery including a lot of rhinoplasties, working almost 100 hours a week to fund his passion for Cranio-Facial 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.

Dr. Monasterio felt from his heart that every one of his young patients deserved a face with which they could bravely meet the world, and if they or their parents did not have money to buy one, it was his divine responsibility to help. Any visitor to his unit would be fully convinced that

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health-care can be so affordable, humane, and excellent, that even the very poor can receive the best medical care at costs that don't bankrupt health-care systems. 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 was 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 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 honour. In his book on Rhinoplasty he presented a step-by-step account of the techniques—each procedure is nicely illustrated with long-term photographic follow-ups. A Mecca for Cranio-facial 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 is Ortiz-Monasterio 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 was 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.

Dr. Monasterio left for his heavenly abode on November 2, 2012 at his residence in Mexico City at the young age of 89. His 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 contributions, achievements and exploits. His life-long 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 came to the reconstructive plastic surgery unit at Hospital Gea Gonzalez seeking physical transformations that will renew their own and their loved ones' lives with the personal stories of the enormously talented medical professionals whose work is both their passion and their gift to humankind (Please visit <http://www.sidewaysfilm.com/beautiful-faces/to> to see the documentary). 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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