

Icon of the Issue

Dr. Ivo Pitanguy: Strived for a 'human right to beauty'



Dr. Ivo Pitanguy (1923–2016)

Dr. Ivo Hécio Jardim de Campos Pitanguy was an Institution of Aesthetic Surgery and a one-man industry. He pioneered procedures that underpinned a burgeoning global industry and dedicated his life to helping people live a better and happier life. He often said, 'I saw the importance of saving lives and saving functions but it seemed that nobody gave importance to the stigma of deformity and how people suffered with that'. It is this stigma, which kept people away from friends and relatives and made them lesser individuals because of a lack of self-esteem, that prompted Dr. Pitanguy to take it up as a lifelong crusade and a challenge worth dedicating all his resources.


Dr. Ivo Pitanguy was born on July 5, 1923. One of the five children of a general surgeon, Antônio de Campos Pitanguy, and his wife, Maria, Pitanguy, he was born in Belo Horizonte, north of Rio de Janeiro, and followed his father's footsteps into the world of surgery. He studied under J.J. Longacre of Cincinnati; Marc Iselin of Paris; and Sir Archibald McIndoe and his cousin, Sir Harold Gillies, in the United Kingdom [Figure 1]. On his return to Rio, Dr. Pitanguy worked initially on trauma surgery but soon created a Plastic Surgery Department in the Santa Casa da Misericórdia public hospital. It came into its own in 1961 after a fire tore through a circus tent in the nearby city of Niterói, leaving many children disfigured with horrendous burns that his skin grafts helped to alleviate. Pitanguy said later that the incident taught him the importance of appearance to emotional well-being.

He also became the Head of the Department of Burns and Plastic Surgery at Souza Aguiar Hospital in Rio

de Janeiro, Brazil. In 1960, Dr. Pitanguy opened the 38th Infirmary Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery in Rio de Janeiro, where it continued to serve some of the country's most disadvantaged citizens. The 38th infirmary, in conjunction with the Clinica Ivo Pitanguy, has remained the Centres of Excellence for the training of international plastic surgeons. Here, he and his students worked for nothing on those who could not afford reconstructive surgery for burns, cleft palates and deformities. He later opened his own private clinic in 1963, where he trained 586 plastic surgeons in the craft of aesthetic surgery, as well as accepting thousands of others for short-term courses and visits. Many of his alumni went on to establish their own schools and clinics in an industry that mushroomed from the 1960s onwards.



Figure 1: With Ralph Millard

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Plastic surgery had a very elitist image in Brazil. Dr. Pitanguy's versatility not only projected him into the national spotlight but also it went some way towards softening negative public perceptions of plastic surgery, as did his work on the burns suffered by the Formula One Driver Niki Lauda in a crash in 1976. A framed advertisement for a surgical clamp named after him, the Pitanguy Flap Demarcator, hung on the wall of his private clinic. His signature procedures included the 'Brazilian butt lift', which sculpts the buttocks by transferring fat from other parts of the body, and a method for tummy tucks that left minimal scarring above the bikini area.

Dr. Pitanguy understood just how important it is for people to feel comfortable with the way they look. He would often say, 'the most important thing is to have a good ego and then you don't need an operation', and so he cashed in on the vanity and insecurity of the rich and famous so successfully that he was able to buy himself a private island from the proceeds of facelifts, tummy tucks and breast enlargements for global tycoons and Hollywood stars. From Sophia Loren, Ursula Andress, Frank Sinatra and Gina Lollobrigida to the humble and the unknown in the streets of Rio, his list of patients spanned a huge spectrum! Known as 'the Maestro' for his roster of celebrity clients, his waiting list of patients remained unending till the very last working day of his life. He understood 'the human right to beauty' and was of the opinion that 'one day, it will be clear that aesthetic surgery brings the desired serenity to those who suffer by being betrayed by nature'. His motto was to help his patients overcome low self-esteem and other psychological ailments. His private clinic included a therapy centre. In later years, Pitanguy's own daughter Gisela performed many of the psychological pre- and post-operative consultations there.

He was arguably the world's best-known cosmetic surgeon and his lavish lifestyle – helicopter commutes, luxury yachts and charity events – was to be a staple of Brazilian gossip magazines for more than half a century. He was an internationally renowned art collector and was once painted by Salvador Dalí. He single-handedly transformed his native Brazil into the world's leading destination for cosmetic surgery!

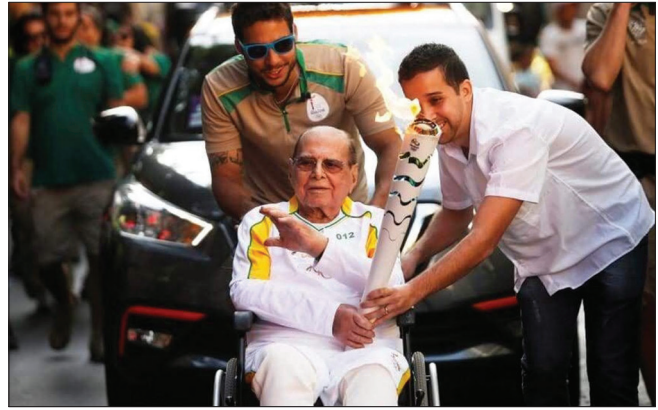


Figure 2: Carrying the Olympic Torch, a day before he passed away

As a lover of the natural world – and an expert on the mating habits of hummingbirds – Pitanguy kept parrots and songbirds in a forest-like setting at the practice, with microphones installed so that patients could hear the birdsong from the waiting room. His island home in Angra dos Reis Bay was converted into a nature reserve.

In recent months, his health had deteriorated. Since September, he had been undergoing dialysis after being diagnosed with a kidney problem. Dr. Ivo Pitanguy breathed his last on August 6, 2016, a day after he travelled bravely with the Rio Olympic torch on his wheelchair [Figure 2]. He is survived by his wife Marilu Nascimento, four children, Ivo, Gisela, Helcius and Bernardo, and five grandchildren.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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