Obituary – Dr. Jacinto Convit – 1913–2014

Dr. Jacinto Convit, renowned for his contributions to leprosy, has died at the age of 100, on May 12, 2014, a few months before his 101st anniversary.

After a period as visiting professor at the University of Stanford in 1962 and later in the Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, Dr. Convit returned to Caracas with the mission to create a research center in tropical medicine. He was a leading figure in the creation in 1972 of the Instituto de Biomedicina in Caracas, Venezuela, where he served as director for several years and was able to gather a highly qualified team of collaborators in different areas of basic research.

The range of interests of Dr. Convit was vast, including leishmaniasis and cancer, an area in which he was involved during his last years of life. Nonetheless, leprosy was the area where he gained an international reputation, not only for his studies with armadillos but, mainly, for his acknowledged leprosy vaccine trial, which is linked to his contribution to the immunotherapy of leishmaniasis. As reported by Dr. Barry Bloom, a close collaborator to Dr Convit for more than 15 years, “He had a passion to deal with two of the most stigmatized diseases in the world – leprosy and a parasite called leishmaniasis. And he devoted his life to finding ways to improve the health of people who, for much of the world and much of the world of science, had been forgotten.”

Besides a refined researcher, Dr Convit was primarily a physician who dealt in quite a humanitarian manner with his patients, working and organizing health services in poor peripheral areas of Caracas, remote areas of the Venezuelan Andes and in the jungle sectors of his country. In connection with his vision of the medical profession he stated that, “A feeling of love towards human beings stimulates the vocation to service, which is none other than a deep sense of love of life. The medical profession is not an occupation devoted to produce money. Those that embrace medicine must have a deep understanding that this is a service to the public in all senses.”

Among the many awards he was granted, Dr. Convit was made a member of France’s Legion of Honor in 2011. He was also awarded the Prince of Asturias Scientific Investigation Prize in 1988, the title of “Public Health Hero” by the Pan American Health Organization in 2002, but missed out on the 1988 Nobel Prize for Medicine. He was one of the outstanding members of the International Leprosy Association serving as President of the ILA for two terms, 1968/1973 and 1973/1978.
Obituary

We deeply regret the passing of Dr. Convit but we recognize that his contributions to leprosy and tropical medicine, as well as his personal and unique approach to the medical profession, will last forever as an example of dedication and perseverance that should be followed by the new generation of researchers worldwide.

Marcos Virmond MD PhD