Obituary – Dr. Jacinto Convit

Dr. Jacinto Convit Garcia, the veteran leprologist, passed away on 12th May, 2014 at the age of 100. His contribution to leprosy work was immense and spanned a period of over 70 years. Dr. Convit, having qualified in medicine in 1938 from Central University of Venezuela, entered the field of dermatology and leprosy very early in his career and he was greatly motivated through the sufferings of leprosy patients he saw when he worked at Cabo Blano Leper Colony. He later played a major role in the establishment of the National Institute of Biomedicine at Caracas where he served as its Director almost to the very end of his life.

Dr. Convit’s contribution to tropical disease research covers a wide range but the most important ones relate to leprosy, whether in the area of clinical leprology, histopathology, and more importantly his efforts towards developing an anti-leprosy vaccine prepared from armadillo-derived killed *M. leprae* in combination with BCG. The vaccine was aimed at both immunotherapy of immune compromised lepromatous leprosy patients as well as immunoprophylaxis of individuals exposed to *M. Leprae* infection. He extended his immunotherapy concept to leishmaniasis and other diseases, including certain types of cancer.

Dr. Convit worked closely with WHO and was the Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research in Histopathological detection and classification of leprosy. Dr. Convit was an important member of the Immunology of Leprosy Group (IMMLEP) set up under the Tropical Diseases Programme (TDR) of WHO, and worked closely with several scientists in the development of killed *M. Leprae* vaccine and its testing in humans, which ultimately lead to a major field trial of the vaccine in Venezuela. The writer, as someone closely involved in the vaccine trial on behalf of TDR/IMMLEP, was always greatly impressed by the scientific rigour he employed in such a large trial and his ability to inspire his team to the maximum.

Dr. Convit was the President of the International Leprosy Association which he served for two terms (1968–1973) and (1973–1978).

Known for his meticulous and tireless work, Dr. Convir was greatly loved by his patients. He was considered as a national hero in Venezuela and was a recipient of several awards including the Prince of Asturias Award (Spain) and the Legion of Honor Award (France). He was also nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1988.

Long after leprosy becomes a relatively less significant disease in the world Dr. Convit will be remembered for his tireless efforts to overcome the disease and to bring succour to the leprosy-affected.

Dr. S.K. Noordeen