Obituary – Michel Lechat (1928–2014)

It is with great sadness that we inform you of the death of Prof. Michel Lechat, who passed away on February 28, at 86 years of age.

It was in 1951, during his medical studies, that he had his first contact with Africa, during a training period spent with Dr Frans Hemerijckx, a renowned Belgian leprologist. It is during that time that he got a passion for the fight against leprosy, a passion he would keep for the whole of his life. Two years later, he went back to the then Belgian Congo to run the Leprosarium of Iyonda, in the Equatorial forest, where he stayed until 1959. This was followed by a PhD at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, and a brilliant career as an epidemiologist, first for WHO in Mexico, Cuba and Haiti, then, from 1967, as Professor of Epidemiology at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, and also later at the Tropical Institute of Antwerp. He published more than 300 scientific papers, including more than 200 papers on leprosy. He was the first to develop an epidemiometric model for leprosy, enabling analysis of the potential impact of different control strategies.

In 1969 he was recognised as a leprosy expert by WHO. He has chaired the ILEP Medical Commission, was a member and chair of the Board of the Damien Foundation Belgium, and served as President of the International Leprosy Association for two mandates. Among his various responsibilities, he was been a Member of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium, Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences and Member, then Chairman, of the Selection Committee for the King Baudouin Prize for Development. To crown this prestigious career, he was conferred with the title of Baron by the Belgian king.

The list of accomplishments of Professor Michel Lechat during his remarkable career could go on and on. It is however more important to underline what most characterised him, scientifically as well as in human terms: his great open-mindedness, his capacity to view each problem in its larger context, the seriousness and enthusiasm he showed for whatever task he embarked upon, and his capacity to inspire the people who worked with him. These qualities, as well as his humanity, made of him a great man. His death leaves an aching void for his family, his friends and all those of us who were close to him or who had had the chance to work with him.

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Etienne Declercq
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