Obituary

Professor Diltor Vladimir Araujo Opromolla
13/04/1934–15/12/2004

In the words of a popular dictum, ‘Live your life as you wish it to be remembered on your grave’. Were this saying applied to the life of Professor Diltor Opromolla, the carving on his headstone would read: Here lies a man who loved his neighbor and consecrated his life to those who, marked by prejudice, found in him not just a physician, but a source of hope and dignity.

Professor Opromolla, as he was universally known, guided his entire life by the first principle of Medicine, carrying out his professional activity serving both individuals and the community, without any kind of discrimination. Born on 13 April 1934, he grew up in São Paulo, witnessing the breakup of his parents’ marriage and working as an office boy during the day and studying at night to become an ‘M.D’. These efforts led to his admission at the Sorocaba School (now the Sorocaba Medical School, in the State of São Paulo) with teachers who also had appointments in the faculty of the University of São Paulo—USP, including great names such as Carlos Lacaz, Mignone, Odorico Machado de Souza and Humbert Cerruti.

While in medical school, he met Professor Lauro de Souza Lima, a meeting which defined his academic and professional life. Taken by Professor Cerruti for a 3-week rotation at Pirapitingui Hospital, Opromolla became immersed in an environment completely on the margin of society at that time, in close contact with Professor Lauro de Souza Lima and leprosy patients. In one of his last interviews, given to Casa Oswaldo Cruz, a branch of Oswaldo Cruz Foundation consecrated to the memory of Brazilian public health, he reminisced: ‘We worked with patients in our classes, and so we gradually lost our fears. I remember that once Cerruti. . . I started to ask “Which is this lesion?” and he took my finger and put it into it. It was a hansenoma. He stuck my finger in a hansenoma! Later, I would even have some beers in the ward. . . (laughs)’.

The joke demystified the disease which would make Opromolla’s international reputation. After graduating in 1957, he took his first job the following year in Sanatório Aymorés, a leprosy hospital in Bauru, São Paulo. It would prove to be his only job – a lifelong dedication of 46 years to the hospital, later renamed Institute Lauro de Souza Lima. Until recently he kept photographs from his early days there showing physicians in cap, mask and gloves as a ‘protection’ against the patients. Little by little, fighting the heavy stigma
stamping the patients, physicians gradually shed their fears, prejudice and ‘protective’
clothing and gear. ‘Dr. Nelson de Souza Campos noticed my interest in this leprosy thing.
And at that time, if they had a student interested in leprosy, they started to “breed” him, you
know... (laughs). Not only it was a life-threatening activity, it was not well regarded in town.’

Under Professor Lauro de Souza Lima, he started to study the treatment of leprosy using
the association of dapsone, which had been introduced in Brazil in 1946, and other drugs,
preparing patients, administering drugs and making weekly case presentations to the
Professor and occasionally to other invited faculty. From the beginning, he documented all
patients with photographs in addition to smear data and patients’ reports, for comparison
purposes. Thanks to his experiments, Brazil was the only country to use drug associations in
the 1970s. Later, he developed the groundbreaking work on the use of rifampicin, still the
most effective of MDT drugs.

By this time, Opromolla was completely committed to his cause, working full time on the
treatment of leprosy. When the old leprosy colony was decommissioned, the facility became
a major hospital, a leprosy research institute and reference center for Brazil and Portuguese-
speaking countries. He fought tirelessly for his ideals. In the 1960s, he created a rehabilitation
centre for neurological handicaps. In the same interview to Casa Oswaldo Cruz, he said: ‘We
offered no rehabilitation. And so we started taking all patients with no feet problems into a room
and taught them how to avoid getting bad feet (laughs). At that time we had no treatment for foot
problems, no orthopaedists in our team, we had nothing, we could only put dressings on. And so
we started working on that... Everything started with this room for people with good feet.’

From a room for treating foot ulcers to the full range of rehabilitation services, from the
creation of a residency in Dermatology to the expansion to 11 different health courses, from a
small bookshelf with old books to the largest leprosy library, without Professor Opromolla’s
determination the history of the Lauro de Souza Lima Institute might have been quite
different. Throughout this period of dedication to the ILSL, he published 231 scientific papers
in major journals, participated in some 300 congresses, oriented dozens of master and doctor
theses, edited Hansenologia Internacionalis and wrote several book chapters. He participated
actively in all leprosy-related governmental activities in Brazil and was the president of the
Latin American branch of the International Leprosy Association and a member of WHO
Steering Committee on the Therapy of Mycobacterial Diseases.

Until his final days, he continued to live for Medicine and leprosy, generous and devoted as
perhaps few other men. Extremely pleasant and charming, he demonstrated his personal
interest; respect and affection to the patients, in a true example of love thy neighbour. ‘I think to
change the name of the disease, from leprosy to Hansen’s disease, is truly fantastic. People who
don’t work with patients don’t understand this, don’t understand... it is good for the patient.
And whom should it benefit? We have to keep the patient in mind, you know... Why should
we say that it used to be called leprosy? What benefit will it bring to these people? It will make
them really ill...’ he said. One of the greatest leaders in the history of mankind, Jesus Christ,
said ‘And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant’. Dr. Opromolla was,
before anything else, a servant. And, above everything else, a great leader to us physicians.

“Thoughts become actions, actions become habits, habits become character, and our
character becomes our destiny”.

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Bibliography

