

Donald Charles Zavala (1924/2022)



Don Zavala, the “grandfather” of fiberoptic bronchoscopy in the United States, was a great teacher also to Argentinian specialists, both in the field of endoscopy and in pulmonary laboratory. He contributed to the creation of a specially useful space for clinical and surgical pulmonology.

This was the result of a life story that deserves to be told.

At the age of 45, after practising internal medicine for 17 years in the city of El Centro, California, near the Mexican border, he decided to start a fellowship in lung diseases. He applied to several hospitals and was accepted by the University of Iowa Hospital and Clinics, Iowa City, Iowa. He was the first fellow of the newly created program, which was equipped with only one spirometer. At the time, lung diseases mostly comprised tuberculosis. After he finished the one-year fellowship he was incorporated as a member of the Division and as such, he attended a congress on otolaryngology in Atlanta (Georgia), where Dr. Shigeto Ikeda, chest surgeon of the National Cancer Center of Tokio introduced the first prototype of the flexible fiberoptic bronchoscope, made by Machida Corporation.

Immediately after that, he tried to convince the Chief of Medicine of the hospital in which he worked to get the funds to travel to Japan, but he only obtained money from the American Lung Association in Iowa to buy a bronchoscope. The device arrived at the university in 1970: the instructions were in Japanese, it did not have biopsy instruments and the aspiration channel was extremely narrow and had limited flexibility.

Zavala started training at night, using a dog called Hannibal who underwent numerous procedures.

In July, 1970, he performed the first fiberoptic bronchoscopy in a patient. This led to the diagnosis of lung cancer, which would have otherwise been impossible.

From then on, his contributions to diagnostic fiberoptic bronchoscopy never stopped, and his publications set the pace of future breakthroughs in the field.

The appearance of his well-known book, “Flexible Fiberoptic Bronchoscopy” (edited by the University of Iowa. Press of Pepco Litho, Cedars Rapids, IA, 1978), allowed him to share his knowledge with numerous specialists.

He soon noticed that the fiberoptic had the ability to diagnose diseases of the airways and of the pulmonary parenchyma, and cultivated a solid and generous friendship with Shigeto Ikeda (Japan) and Howard A. Andersen (Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, United States). From his laboratory at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, Donald shared knowledge, both at home and abroad, with great generosity.

Donald's most important contributions were within the realm of fiberoptic bronchoscopy, but he enthusiastically developed expertise in cardiopulmonary exercise testing and nutritional assessment, of which he published the respective training books.

He had a unique intellectual ability to "section" every technical-scientific problem, to solve each and every one of them, to put everything back together in a new, more precise and beneficial way. Just to listen to him and watch him perform every maneuver once was enough to learn a key lesson.

Apart from this particular intelligence, there was also the simplicity of his kind Hispanic character; and all of that together left a memory that will last forever in those of us who had the joyful privilege of knowing him. His memory will always make us smile thankfully, with true admiration.

He visited Argentina on several occasions and participated in many courses in Buenos Aires, Mendoza and Corrientes.

Donald Zavala had the right to be proud of his many achievements and numerous trainees... all of us can certainly say: "You touched my life".

Juan A. Mazzei, Hugo Esteva