Obituary

Marcel Legrain (1923–2003)

Five years ago it was Claude Jacobs’ happy task to celebrate his mentor Marcel Legrain’s 75th birthday in these columns (Nephrol Dial Transplant 1998; 13: 1699–1700). Now it is my heavier burden to record his passing at the age of almost 80 years.

I will not repeat all the facts given in Claude’s Laudatio. Marcel was a Parisian by birth, training and practice, and proud to be one. He inspired several generations of French and European physicians to become nephrologists by his example. Two areas of nephrology benefited particularly from his expertise. The first were patients in acute renal failure. In the late 1940s, these were becoming more common with better resuscitation using early blood transfusion and better electrolyte replacement. Having worked with this group of patients and submitted his thesis on the subject in 1950, at his mentor Professor Dérot’s suggestion, he spent 2 years in Boston with John Merrill, and returned to help set up one of the first haemodialysis units in France, using the Boston version of Kolff’s rotating drum artificial kidney. This remained in use until after 1960, and was even used to launch the long-term dialysis programme at the Hôtel Dieu! At the same time, following some tentative essays during the 1950s, a transplantation programme was begun with surgeon Rene Küss; Marcel looked after the medical aspects of this, including some of the first unrelated living donor grafts in the early 1960s. The second group of patients who benefited particularly from his attention were diabetics in renal failure. Having worked for some time with Dérot in the latter’s unit which covered metabolic diseases and diabetes, he had a lifelong interest in diabetics afflicted with renal disease, and above all those unfortunates with renal failure. When he moved to the Hôpital La Pitié in 1972, he was one of the first physicians in Europe to realize the need to treat this neglected minority, who were eventually to become a majority. In particular, he pioneered their treatment using peritoneal dialysis, at a time when few thought this mode of treatment had any future for long-term maintenance. In addition, he made many other contributions to the study and practice of kidney disease, and co-authored with Claude Jacobs, Jean-MichelSuc and others an Abrégé de Néphrologie in 1976 which was published also in English. Amongst his broader work was helping to establish the Société de Néphrologie in 1960, and later to be one of the first Presidents of the EDTA when this post became a 3 year rather than an annual appointment related to the Congress, serving from 1978 to 1980. Finally, after his retirement from his professorial post in 1986 in Paris, he helped set up nephrology services in Algeria during the 1980s, spending 2 years there helping the development of North African nephrology.

Marcel was a delightful man to know, full of energy and with an outgoing personality capable of great charm. His accent when speaking his excellent English was entirely Gallic, which added to the charm. I had the pleasure of knowing him over many years, and like everyone was always delighted to meet him again, whether at the bedside of a difficult patient in the hospital or at scientific meetings. His last year was a cruel one, with the slow death of his dear wife Colette, whom he himself had developed a glioblastoma. We miss him; some slight idea of his delightful personality can be gained from the interview in the ISN Video Legacy archive, excerpts from which are available on the CD-ROM distributed by that organization.

J. Stewart Cameron