

Dr. José Miguel Alvear
WITH MY RESPECT AND ADMIRATION

Dr. Jorge Neptalí Alarcón. 2010.

It is a great honor for me, as well as an extraordinary privilege, to be able to contribute, as well as I am able, to highlight the magnificent achievements of an Ecuadoran physician, namely Dr. José Miguel Alvear, an exemplar of the practice of surgery in Ecuador. Nevertheless, I confess that I may not be able to achieve this goal, given that the qualities of my countryman in this respect are truly outstanding.

Dr. Alvear is a magnificent example of Ecuadoran culture in general, and that of Quito in particular. He is a man who lives life to the fullest. He is joyful, possessed of highly courtesy manners, dynamic, aggressive, and even a believer in the Christian faith. Many other virtues enrich him. Dr. Alvear's personality contains many facets: Professor of Medicine at the Central University of Ecuador, a historian, indefatigable and expert in the tools of his trade, a professional fully dedicated to academic activities concerning advanced surgery, and a very efficient and creative organizer in his local and even world-wide events, aimed at promoting and spreading the newly finds in the field of that important branch of Medicine. It is necessary to say that the objective of this sketch is not to highlight in detail each of these facets and activities, a tremendous task that would require more than one book.

First of all, it must be said that his *Curriculum Vitae* alone covers some 60 pages, revealing his numerous productive activities. Therefore, I will seek to cover some of the most important aspects of this distinguished Ecuadoran surgeon, which may perhaps not be well known. Among these, his postdoctoral studies at some American universities, as well as his four years of professional practice in Gallup, New Mexico, a picturesque city located in the American West.

It was in the United States where I was fortunate to briefly meet Dr. Alvear many years ago in the decade of the 1970's, and again in following years during his numerous business trips to New Mexico, mainly to Albuquerque, the city where I reside as well as the home of the University of New Mexico. It was from this institution that I received my Ph.D. in Spanish American Literature in 1969.

Coincidentally Dr. Alvear received his degree as Doctor of Medicine from the Central University of Ecuador in that same year. A scant two months later he realized his dream of pursuing postgraduate studies in the United States. He took courses specializing in general surgery for five years at the University of New Mexico and the University of Connecticut, followed by two years of training in transplant surgery at Michigan State University in Wayne, MI. I take the liberty of describing Dr. Alvear as a dreamer in the best meaning. As a newly graduated physician in 1969, like so many of his classmates, he dreamed of further developing the practice of organ transplants, inspired perhaps by the daring first heart transplant

performed by Dr. Christian Barnard in Cape Town, just two years before. Equipped with expertise in surgery, and above all with his special training in organ transplants, Dr. Alvear returned to Gallup, New Mexico, where he opened his professional practice in July, 1976. At Gallup's McKinley County Hospital the young Dr. Alvear displayed his expertise in the techniques of organ transplants. Nevertheless he was soon to feel a certain frustration given the lack of opportunities to perform the complex operations for which he had been trained. There was a shortage of healthy organ donors and even of posthumous donations. Dr Alvear was not discouraged at the lack of opportunities to put into practice his highly developed skills.

Determined to instill an ethic of respect for life, Dr. Alvear began a new program at the hospital where he was working to encourage people to donate organs for transplants, mainly kidneys. In those early days, this visionary physician observed, "Transplants are very slow here, because there are not kidneys available, even taking into consideration the number of [deadly] accidents that happen in New Mexico. There are many kidneys that are wasted." His remonstrance was not in vain. The Gallup City Council, police agencies, and many physician examiners backed his initiative to obtain additional donor organs.

In fact, transplants were not done in Gallup or in any other McKinley county city, but rather at the University of New Mexico Hospital located in the distant metropolis of Albuquerque. Under these circumstances, Dr. Alvear dedicated himself to general surgery operations, including those aimed at "harvesting" kidneys, preserving them, and transporting them to the more populous city of Albuquerque. "In this way," Dr. Alvear said, "the two hospitals, McKinley and University of New Mexico, will be in constant communication, for the benefit of whomever need transplants."

One of the most exciting and difficult "harvests" of kidneys by Dr. Alvear was on the night of December 23rd, 1976, just four months after the opening of his office in Gallup. The donor was Ms. Louis Dils, a 17-year old who died in a car accident on December 21. Dr. Alvear, moved by his spirit of altruism and the culture of his native Quito man, wasted no time in transporting the valuable organs to Albuquerque. He was frustrated to learn that these kidneys were of no use for the intended purpose. One must realize that the organs for transplant must take into account the matching conditions, as is the case for blood transfusions. It frequently happened in those days that if there were patients ready for transplant, the required kidneys were not available and vice versa. Nevertheless, Dr. Alvear continued to be fully committed to his medical ideals and did not stop promoting organ donations. Two years after this failed endeavor, on February 1978, he still complained, perhaps hyperbolically that "no effort is made in McKinley County to get kidneys from victims of traffic accidents." In view of these and other unfavorable circumstances, our tenacious countryman laboriously dedicated himself to put to work his surgery techniques in every operation that required such specialized expertise. For him, the principal task was to save human lives.

Just to mention his numerous interventions would be an almost impossible task, inasmuch as Dr. Alvear's modesty precludes keeping track of all of them. Therefore it is enough to mention two cases that show his great expertise as a surgeon.

One of his momentous experiences in surgery, being the first in the city of Gallup, was the connection of a vein and artery which enabled Mrs. Elvina Smith to be able to use a dialysis machine. The thankful patient, a nurse by profession, found in Dr. Alvear "a great person and a very efficient surgeon."

A few months later, he undertook another even more difficult and complicated case. It was a surgery that, as he himself recognizes, was perhaps "the most important" of his medical practice in the aforementioned city of Gallup: In a grueling four hour surgery, he reconnected the veins, arteries and tendons of the hand of a man which had been almost completely severed. The patient was a well known automobile dealer from Albuquerque. The dealer "did not even pay my fees, but I derived great spiritual satisfaction," Dr. Alvear said later. We can readily appreciate that, in Dr. Alvear, courteous manners, generosity, and a deep spirituality go hand in hand, all qualities of a true believer in Christ.

In contrast with many of his contemporaries, equally expert in surgery, Dr. Alvear openly recognizes that there is an Intelligent Entity infinitely superior to any surgeon. His relations with his patients reveal an extraordinarily human approach, the fruit of his spirituality. That is why he sincerely complains of the dehumanization of surgery in our day. Many physicians use the tools of surgery with no regard to the humanity of the patient. In this regard he observes, with his customary cordiality: "I became a physician with the conviction of being a surgeon, because with the skills of my hands, I would be able to cure directly and immediately my patient. With the passing of time, this practice went out of style, and now we depend on the instruments. A physician does not touch the site of operation. We have lost the spiritual and direct relationship with the patient." But, in spite of such cold instrumentality, this "spirituality" remains in him and it harmoniously complements another of his characteristics of human nature: that of his love for the high values of our culture.

As a member of the Spanish Culture Preservation in New Mexico, Dr. Alvear presented the Program "The Poet and the People" at the Gallup's Library Center for Artistic Presentations, on September 27, 1978. This promoter of Hispanic culture said at that time: "This program was a personal dream that took place tonight." His great love for Hispanic culture prompted him to conclude the program by personally reading the poem "El alma en los labillos". One must bear in mind that Dr. Alvear's understanding encompasses, as does that of many lovers of liberal arts, the fact that the profession they practice includes many aspects of human nature, specifically in this case, literature.

His fruitful activity as a surgeon and ambassador for Hispanic culture in New Mexico, and mainly in McKinley County, extended to various other fields. During his four short years in Gallup, he served as president of the McKinley County Medical Society and vice-president of the Gallup Opera Guild. He was an active member of the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, and the American Medical Society. He is a dynamic man whose range of endeavors go beyond his medical vocation. His participation in a wide range of activities for the benefit of New Mexico in general, and McKinley County in particular, came to an end in 1980.

In that year, in spite of his fruitful and successful efforts, Dr. Alvear decided to return to his native land. He wanted to put his experience and surgical expertise acquired abroad at the service of his fellow Ecuadorans. Therefore, he closed his medical office in Gallup and departed for Quito. Dr. Alvear was unable to conceal his sadness upon departing Gallup. He said at the time, "I have no desire to leave Gallup and the American way of life, but my interest in the medicine of transplants compels me to pursue my career in Quito."

And so it was. With a wealth of experience in surgical techniques gained in more than a decade of staying in the United States, he wasted no time in opening the Pichincha Clinic in collaboration with some colleagues the same year he returned to Ecuador. Nevertheless, he found his ambition of performing organs transplants frustrated once again. There had not been any cases of organ transplants in Quito. He found no support for his undertaking in any of the Ecuadorean capital's hospitals. This situation was even more adverse than the one he found in his four years of professional practice in Gallup. Therefore he dedicated himself exclusively to general surgery.

His indefatigable medical practice for over 40 years in his native land, as well as in the United States, is truly extraordinary, since it goes beyond surgery alone. As has been said previously, the nature of this brief sketch does not allow for highlighting in detail each aspect of such a long career. Nevertheless, it is important to discuss some of his academic activities related to the medical profession.

Dr. Alvear excels as a proponent of modern surgery, both at the local and the international level. He served as a professor in the School of Medicine at the Central University of Ecuador, where he founded the Department of Experimental Surgery. He has to his credit some 95 publications at the international in books, magazines, journals, videos, compact discs, as well as another 25 publications in Ecuador.

Since 1982 he has given some 140 lectures at the international level in 45 different countries and another 150 in Ecuador. He also has to his credit 20 lectures on General Surgery and Medical Ethics given at educational institutions as a visiting Professor and Lecturer. Dr. Alvear is also a recognized worldwide for his work related to implants of the esophagus in children. But his most important academic achievement is perhaps the *History of the Ecuadoran Academy of Medicine*, published in 2009.

This important book was presented on April 16, 2009, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Ecuadoran Academy of Medicine. The presidents of the Academies of Medicine, History and Languages were present at the ceremony. Hernán Rodríguez, president of the Academies of History and Language introduced Dr. Alvear and his book. Richly deserved honors were not lacking. This distinguished academican said on that occasion: "*The History of the Ecuadoran Academy of Medicine* is a book that shows the greatness of its author, that amply displays the talents of a surgeon as historian." His talent as a lecturer and historian is outstanding, but it does not overshadow his talent as a leader and a creative organizer. A complete list of his activities and honors would be overwhelming. Let it

suffice to mention some of the most prominent honors. This distinguished Ecuadoran served in the following capacities:

President of the McKinley County Medical Society, New Mexico
President of the Ecuadoran Society of Surgery
President of the Ecuadoran Academy of Surgery
First Vice-president of the International College of Surgeons

At present, Dr Alvear is a member of the Executive Council of the International College of Surgeons, as well an active or honorary member of 16 international medical societies as well as of another 5 Ecuadoran medical societies.

It is imperative to highlight, in a special way, his genius as a leader and organizer, when he presided over the XXXIV World Congress of the International College of Surgeons in October, 2004. The love for Ecuador led him to choose Quito as the site for this Congress. This event was really extraordinary because of its results. More than 500 foreign physicians participated, 350 presentations were made, 50 of them by Ecuadoran physicians, and 8 scholarly lectures were given. This Congress was without precedents for its financial success. Thanks to the organizing ability of our fellow Ecuadoran, the Congress was carried out without external financial assistance; moreover, the event generated an appreciable sum of money for the International College of Surgeons. This successful outcome was all the more remarkable, since there were no antecedents in the history of the organization for such a successful outcome. Dr. Alvear's brilliant performance in this regard must be added to several others, which were perhaps of even greater prestige.

In May of 2002, Dr. Alvear, already a figure of international renown, represented Ecuador and the International College of Surgeons at the 26th General Assembly of the United Nations, and again in May 2005 before the World Health Organization in Switzerland.

It is my pleasure to conclude this sketch reiterating that Dr. José Miguel Alvear, because of his great achievements and contributions is a **great champion** in the field of Modern Surgery in Ecuador and internationally. One hope that our country's authorities honor him in a tangible and effective way some time in the near future.

With my respect and admiration,

Dr. Jorge Neptalí Alarcón, former Professor of the University of Albuquerque, former University of New Mexico Instructor, former Examiner of Spanish Language and Literature of the International Baccalaureate Organization, sponsored by the Prince of Gales.

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