Rene Favaloro-Pioneer Cardiac Surgeon

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Rene Favaloro (1923-2000) was one of the most preeminent cardiovascular surgeon in the second half of 20th Century, a great innovator and a pioneer in the field. Denton Cooley said about him “surgeon we should credit with introducing CABG into the clinical arena. Indeed, Dr. Favaloro’s pioneering contribution to cardiovascular surgery will be an enduring legacy to his homeland Argentina and humanity”.

Favaloro was compassionate and selfless. He never forgot his country and its roots. A son of a carpenter from a small town in Argentina, he was influenced by his maternal uncle, who was a general practitioner. He grew up with love for land and nature, and graduated in 1949 from the Medical Science Faculty of La Plata University. His interest in thoracic surgery grew from his surgical teacher Dr. Mainette. Favaloro began a successful career as a surgeon at La Plata. However, he resigned due his differences in intellectual principles with Peron’s Party. He started general practice as a country doctor in a small town La Pampa in central Argentina. There he treated patients with minor surgeries as well as an internist, pediatrician, and obstetrician. His house became a clinic with a laboratory, radiology equipment and beds to hospitalize patients. As the facilities grew he even performed major surgeries such as colectomies and gastrectomies. He taught his poor patients preventive medicine and rules of hygiene, and also set up mobile blood banks.

After ten years of country practice, his interest in thoracic surgery still remained keen. Favaloro then traveled to Cleveland Clinic to join the Department of Thoracic and Cardiovascular surgery, where he became assistant to Donald Effler. During this period he developed lasting friendship with Mason Sones—father of coronary cine-angiography. His post operative results could be evaluated with cine-angiography.

Coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) is a commonplace surgical procedure today for patients with proper indications. It was different in early 60s; concept of early myocardial salvage and revascularization was only a hope. At the Cleveland clinic Favaloro considered the possibility of saphenous vein to bypass diseased coronary artery in order to deliver blood flow distally. He put his ideas in practice in May 1967, on a stabilized patient with total occlusion of proximal third of his right coronary artery with success. Favaloro had performed the first documented “aorto-coronary bypass”. By November the same year he performed the first bypass for acute myocardial infarction. Standardization of his technique called bypass or myocardial revascularization surgery became fundamental work of his career. His ground breaking surgical and technical contribution has dramatically improved the quality of life of many more patients with IHD. For many it was the only hope at that time, since Coronary angioplasty and stents arrived only a decade later.

He returned to his native country in 1971 and established Favaloro Foundation for education, research and clinical activities. The Foundation was in debt due to economic depression of 1998 and political crisis. Argentine government never responded to his request for financial aid. Rene Favaloro was frustrated and committed suicide by shooting himself in the chest, in July 2000.

Apart from being a great innovator and pioneer in the field of myocardial revascularization surgery Rene Favaloro will be remembered, as a man with love for his country, a passion for his work and a strong sense of social responsibilities.