

IN MEMORIAM

Joseph HAJJAR • 1924 - 2007

<http://www.lebanesemedicaljournal.org/articles/58-1/inmemoriam1.pdf>

Professor Joseph Hajjar was born on March 18th of 1924 in Beirut. During his medical studies at the French Faculty of Medicine, at Saint Joseph University, he trained with Professor Yves Poursines who was a pathologist and a neurologist. He submitted a thesis on peduncular paraplegias. Between 1950 and 1954, he was admitted for internship at La Timone hospital in Marseille, then as an assistant at Lariboisière and La Salpêtrière hospitals in Paris, and finally as a resident at the Queen's Square hospital in London. He trained in neurology with Roger, Gastaut, Alajouanine, Nevin, and Ironside who said about him : "His knowledge of neurology was above the average for postgraduate students who attend this hospital ; his approach to neurological problems was intelligent and sound." He also acquired competence in rheumatology with Stanislas de Sèze. When he came back to Lebanon in 1954, he climbed the academic ladder, being successively head of medical clinic, head of laboratory, part-time clinical lecturer ; after that, he passed the "agrégation" examination in Paris in 1966, and after 1972, was appointed titular professor of neurology, being the first one in this function, together with Professor Sami Tohmé. Parallel to this program, in the hospital hierarchy, he was assistant in the department of medicine at the Hôtel-Dieu de France hospital from 1962 to 1968, then associate head of department for medical neurology in the department of medicine. In 1972, he became head of the neurology department which was created at that time and fulfilled his duties, which he shared with Professor Sami Tohmé, until 1989.



I met Pr Hajjar during my first year of medical school, when he was beginning his teaching responsibilities in 1955. He told us that neurology is the most rational branch of medicine ; in fact, at that time, clinical and anatomical correlations were much more rigorous than for other organs. During the early years of his practice, he demonstrated this idea by indicating to the surgeon the side of a brain hematoma, or the level of a herniated disc, based on clinical signs and symptoms only. Pr Hajjar was also a pioneer in electroencephalography, the only specialist before him was Pr Fuad Sabra at AUB.

I can testify to his teaching qualities : after one year of companionship in the hospital, I had acquired enough knowledge to continue my training in France in neurology departments which require a high level of ability, and was up to the job. Many other colleagues after me benefited from his teaching.

His human qualities were as rich as his academic and professional skills. He distinguished himself by his honesty and courtesy in his relationship with colleagues, forever friendly. He always encouraged the young beginner. He had an excellent contact with patients. He was fluent in Arabic, French, English, Armenian and Turkish. Above all, his kindness, and his efforts for solving his patients' problems earned him a deep and sustained attachment. The best sign of this attachment was the lines of people in his waiting room , and the number of those who called his home after he retired. We know that neurology concerns many chronic diseases without known treatment, and that patients go around specialists. By reviewing the history of these patients, the image of Pr Hajjar was always evoked with great respect.

Pr Hajjar published a respectable number of publications. He was a founding member of the Lebanese Society of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry, and was its president for two years. He was also an honorary member of the French Society of Neurology.

With his wife Nora, he instilled the sense of honesty, labor and generosity into his children. During fifty years of marriage, they exemplified these values in their community. He was ambitious for himself, but much more for his family; he always pushed them towards better achievements. His daughter Odile studied pharmacy at the Faculty of Pharmacy at Saint Joseph University, and is working in the pharmaceutical industry. His elder son, Jean-Jacques, obtained a doctoral degree in electronic engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and is now pursuing a brilliant career in engineering. His younger son, Roger, attended Harvard Medical School, was an associate professor of medicine at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and is now the director of the Cardiovascular Research Center and a professor of medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. Roger is well-known for his discoveries in the field of gene therapy of heart failure.

The war of fifteen years has affected his properties without affecting his legendary good humor. When his buildings were occupied, he told me, with a smile: "I consider that I have nothing now."

I had the painful privilege of following his treatment during the last months of his life, until his death on September 2nd of 2007. I saw him facing the issues with the same serenity that he always had.

Professor Hajjar has marked numerous generations of practitioners. He is one of the greatest figures of Lebanese medicine and neurology.

Raymond CHEMALY, MD*

*Hôtel-Dieu de France University Hospital, Neurology Department, Beirut, Lebanon.
e-mail : chemalyre@dm.net.lb