Tribute to Professor Bernard George

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Professor Bernard George passed away on Thursday, September 16, 2021, in Toulouse, France, where he had been living, since his retirement, with his partner Michelle. The neurosurgical community shares the pain and sadness of his family and friends.

Bernard George was a great man, recognized worldwide as one of the most prominent figures of neurosurgery.

He found neurosurgery to be his true calling, including all the sacrifices that this discipline imposes upon one. He was one of the main architects of skull base surgery in France and beyond.

Following residency at the PITIE – SALPETRIERE Hospital in Paris, Bernard George pursued further training with Dr. Patrick Derome at the FOCH Hospital. There with his co-interne Dr. Claude Laurian, a vascular surgeon, he demonstrated an extraordinary audacity by performing the first operation on the vertebral artery, introducing the now famous anterolateral approach to the skull base (Fig. 1). While many of us practice surgery with striving for excellence, very few have the instinct to create new techniques, as he did. His work on the vertebral artery resulted in two major reference publications: B. George & C. Laurian, *The vertebral artery*, Springer-Verlag/Wien 1987, and B. George, R. Spetzler & M. Bruneau, *Pathology and surgery around the vertebral artery*, Springer-Verlag France, Paris, 2011.

Having achieved success, Bernard George turned his attention to the most complex anatomical regions of the skull base, making it a known and mastered environment. It took genius and passion to achieve this. This is what made him one of the great pioneers of neurosurgery worldwide, someone who leaves an indelible mark on the history of our discipline.

Bernard George was an exceptional surgeon. He was rigorous, thorough, and precise, both in the preparation for surgery and its execution. Most of his procedures were surgical challenges where failure was not an option. Nothing was left to chance. On his way to success, he became a Formula 1 driver, a sport he was particularly fond of, on Sundays on TV and the other days of the week in the columns of the sport newspaper “L’Équipe.” It was inconceivable for him to consider surgery without thinking he was his patient best chance. Around him, in the operating room, he had gathered a team around him with one ambition: to win. The anesthesiologist, the nurse anesthetist, the instrumentalist, the circulating nurse, the intern, everyone had to give the best of themselves. The mental concentration in the room was absolute; woe be to the one who inadvertently disrupted it. Bernard George was certainly endowed with the skills that would ensure success, but it was his willpower that allowed him to aim for perfection in successive surgical maneuvers and complex decisions he had to make and to relentlessly pursue the smallest piece of chordoma to the end, remaining true to one of his maxims: “It’s not me who is aggressive, it’s the tumor!” It is this same willpower that allowed him to face his own disease, to overcome it, and to come back to fight for his patients and his department.

After his internship, he practiced at the Assistance Publique - Hôpitaux de Paris, the largest university hospital in Europe. He was appointed full Professor in 1988 and directed the Department of Neurosurgery at the Lariboisière Hospital, from 1997 to 2014. This hospital was a stronghold and “Larib” has become, thanks to Bernard George, a diminutive that resonates strongly in the neurosurgical community worldwide.

Bernard George lived neurosurgery with a contagious passion, sharing this adventure with so many neurosurgeons. Many of us in France and around the world have been inspired by “Monsieur George” and his teachings. His students, who spent time at “Larib” learning skull base surgery, can be found in all continents. The countless neurosurgeons who came to observe him excel in the operating

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Fig. 1 Bernard George during a demonstration of the anterolateral approach in 2018

room and those fortunate enough to have worked with him were forever influenced by his personality and his unwavering commitment to his patients.

He had many friends and admirers, all over the world, who will remember him as a great character!

His charisma, sharp speech, and cleverness were impressive. His eyes were clear and piercing; his smile and his laughter bright and not for sale. When discussions moved away from neurosurgery, one was surprised by the breadth of his interest. He was curious about everything.

At Lariboisière, he was as much a man of iron, intransigent at times, as he was a just and generous man to whom one felt close. One could occasionally tremble in front of the man who would not compromise on his principles and the vision he had of a commitment a neurosurgeon should have. Every day started at 8:00 AM, not 8:01 AM. Many residents learned it the hard way! But he was also available to all. His humility and the simplicity of his daily life were remarkable, in stark contrast to the admiration and respect he earned worldwide for his achievements.

He loved his service and his team loved him back. At the end of the day, he was often seen visiting the floors. He was always interested and inquiring about people's personal and professional concerns, and his availability to his team members was as sincere as his commitment to patients.

His surgical mastery inspired the confidence of his patients, who loved him just as much for the warm relationship he maintained with them. He had established his own arrangement in the consultation room that was unique to

Fig. 2 Bernard George receives the Olivecrona Award in Stockholm in 2008

him, an illustration of this state of mind: his chair was not placed behind the desk—which created a barrier and oriented the relationship in an unequal face to face between the knowledge of the great surgeon and the patient diminished by his state of illness—but on the side, so that the absence of physical separation reduced the gap and restored the balance in the singular encounter between doctor and patient.

During his career, he was awarded the highest honors in our discipline with the Herbert Olivecrona Medal, “the Nobel Prize of Neurosurgery” in 2008 in Stockholm (Fig. 2), and the Vilhelm Magnus Medal in 2012, both of which are awarded annually to the greatest names in world neurosurgery, thus becoming the first French neurosurgeon to receive such honors.

He spearheaded the fight to treat chordomas in France and around the world. Patients and their families came from all over the world to benefit from his expertise, but having experienced surgery himself, he did not like the word “benefit” and was against this element of language.

“The patient does not benefit, he suffers, do not forget it.” With these words, he implored us to remain rational, prudent, and humble about who we are as surgeons.

He always chose what was best for his patients. When interventional neuroradiology appeared as an option to treat aneurysms and AVMs, he was one of the first to promote these new techniques locally and to assume his choice

beyond Lariboisière, considering them in the best interest of the patients. He did the same with endonasal endoscopy, encouraging his students to become pioneers in this technique. For them he was the perfect teacher.

Bernard George is also the enigma, a contrast between a man who was incredibly endearing but while remained very modest and discreet about himself. At “Larib,” this translated into sharing a cup of coffee on the northwest bench in the courtyard taken with the entire team, during a moment of collegial relaxation, and moments spent alone reading “L’Équipe” at the café l’Ambroise Paré in front of the hospital.

At the time of his retirement in 2014, after having passed on his know-how and his conception of what a neurosurgery service should be, he trusted his pupils to carry on. He remained available and listened with extreme kindness, offering his help and advice.

He had been fighting relentlessly for 17 years against cancer, defying all the prognoses. The uncertainty of tomorrow had long been part of his life. The unique distance he created between himself and his illness allowed him to share his

daily life as a patient without creating discomfort or distorting the relationship he had with us.

With his fierce willpower, he remained true to himself until the end, offering us a final lesson of courage, dignity, and thirst for life.

On September 16, 2021, neurosurgery lost a star.

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