

René Stoppa (1921–2006)

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Professor René Stoppa was born in a small fishing village of the Constantinois, formerly French Algeria, where his father was a magistrate. After primary and secondary schooling in Oran, he started his medical studies at the University of Algiers' Faculty of Medicine in October 1939. From 1942 to 1945 he enlisted as a volunteer in WWII and was assigned to active duty in France's First Army. After the war he resumed his medical studies becoming an Assistant in Anatomy,

then a demonstrator in the Anatomy Laboratory of the University of Algiers, where he taught and performed research from 1947 to 1954. In 1950, he was appointed Intern in Paris Hospitals, a post which can be obtained only through arduous competition. He qualified in medicine in 1954 and qualified in his specialty, general surgery, in the same year. His academic ascent continued unabated from 1954 to 1960 when he reached the rank of Surgeon to the Hospitals of Algiers and, in 1962, Chief of the Surgical Service of the University of Algiers Surgical Center. From 1962 to 1965, he was at the prow of the French medical presence, and of its academic teaching, in Algeria, under the umbrella of Franco-Algerian Co-operation. In 1965, he was appointed surgeon-in-chief to the surgical service of the University of Amiens then, in 1967, Professor of Clinical Studies at the University of Amiens' Faculty of Medicine (Jules Verne University of Picardy), and, finally, Professor Emeritus and honorary Surgeon-in-Chief in 1992.

Surgery taking place of pride in a surgeon's life, Professor Stoppa never failed to display the distinction of belonging to the brilliant school of surgery of the University of Algiers which, as the only French University on the African continent, contributed to the spread and prestige of that University. In this internationally renowned department of anatomy of the Faculty of Algiers, René Stoppa was markedly influenced by his lengthy exposure to, and formative years in, anatomy.

The professional and academic endeavors of Professor Stoppa were dedicated to general surgery, with an early orientation toward gastro-intestinal surgery and a definite tendency toward surgery of the abdominal wall. Among the topics which caught his attention and which fostered research projects, with post-graduate

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teaching and publications, one must cite wound healing, limb ischemia, trauma in general and multiple trauma, and chronic osteomyelitis. In gastro-intestinal surgery he was interested in megacolon, peptic ulceration, and gastro-esophageal reflux. Several innovations were proposed in pancreatico-biliary surgery—sphincterotomy (Oddi), biliary tree drainage, and common bile duct replacement. In hernia surgery he conducted research projects on prosthetic materials for abdominal wall repair, the mechanism of hernia formation, and classification of groin hernias. In 1965, he designed, developed, and disseminated a personally developed technique in groin hernia repair—wrapping of the visceral (hernial) sac with a large synthetic sheet through a midline pre-peritoneal approach applicable to multiple recurrent groin hernias and incisional hernias. Several thousand cases of such hernias have been the subject of French and international publications.

Within the realm of academic teaching, after Professor Stoppa's appointment to the Jules Verne University of Picardy he created most of the disciplines now in existence except for neurosurgery and orthopedics. He contributed to the transformation of the Medical School of the University of Amiens (which had been created by Napoleon Bonaparte for provision of medical care to military personnel) into the Faculty of Medicine. He created the school of surgery of the University of Amiens and directed its teaching programs, with the objective of instituting national degrees in general surgery and, subsequently, gastro-intestinal surgery. The Amiens school of surgery has contributed to the education of countless French and foreign surgeons (notably African, Malagasi, and Middle Eastern). Other teaching endeavors were University missions to Bolivia, Peru, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, and Zaire.

René Stoppa authored more than 500 publications in French and international journals, produced twelve surgical films, and organized or presided over several national and international events. He was a Member of the French Surgical Association and a member of its Administrative Council. He was a founding member of GREPA (Group for the Research and Study [Etude] of the Abdominal Wall [Paroi Abdominale]) and its honorary president. He was a founding member and former President of the Society for Visceral Radiosurgery and a founding member of the Collegium Internationale Chirurgiae Digestivae. He was a member of the French Academy of Surgery, a member of its administrative council and its annual secretary (1991). He was also a member of the National Academy of Medicine, a fellow of the American College of Surgeons, and a member of the International Society of Surgery. In

2005 he was awarded the distinction of Honorary Member of the French Surgical Association, an exceptional honor awarded to French citizens.

Gifted with a keen sense of curiosity, Professor Stoppa always cultivated an interest in surgical innovations for which he kept a largely open eye and mind. He considered himself fortunate to have been exposed to situations of enthusiastic creation in professional and university settings and often claimed to have been much helped by coworkers in his research projects and by his French and international colleagues who never hesitated to discuss and enrich his surgical passion.

To his students, his nurses, and his staff Professor Stoppa remained ever the beloved man in charge of a dedicated team to which he welcomed me (Dr Verhaeghe) in 1971. If daily life at his side was not always easy, the acute perceptiveness and penetration of his remarks otherwise heavy with imagery, remained graven in our memories, for he knew how to listen and to impart to each and everyone his own experience and that of his entourage. He taught us that a career could succeed only by application of hard work and not by a strict search for honors. The difficulty of any task was never a hindrance, for he was dedicated to his mission as a surgeon. The care rendered to a patient, as much by his surgery as by his research and commitment, remained an objective constantly reaffirmed. From the thankless situations which may have confronted him, the lesson always filtered that one must never expect recognition from one's colleagues but that such recognition would eventually clamor from beyond our walls! Around Professor Stoppa it was possible to be of an entirely different character and yet progress together, to be entirely different and still respect one another.

Having been his student and his associate, I bear witness to the trust and sincere consideration which he always manifested toward the members of his team. His life was, for the most part, spent in the hospital and for his patients. Blessed with a rare gift and elegance in the language of Moliere, he could express his feelings with unparalleled refinement—comforting, encouraging, congratulating, through hand-written letters, to those he believed in, for he remained available and attentive to their personal and professional needs.

My (Dr Bendavid) first personal encounter with Professor Stoppa dates back to the early 1980s when I began participating in GREPA meetings. These were followed by a visit to his hospital in Amiens where he offered courses in hernia surgery. I was struck by the delicate and rare elegance of his language, verbal and written, and I often wondered whether, had he not been a surgeon, Victor Hugo's eminence as a writer would have been severely challenged (a comment

which he negated with his usual modesty). I shared with Professor Stoppa a common origin—we both hailed from a former French North African dominion. We often shared Arabic expressions. The many years since our first meeting kept confirming my constant admiration and observation of a man of immense culture who was always and ever warm, welcoming, courteous, knowledgeable beyond surgery, and generous with his time, with his participation, and with his contributions. He had the ability to facilitate any project by introducing principals to one another. A case in point was the rewarding translation of Fruchaud's seminal work on the surgical anatomy of groin hernias, an event he had so fervently promoted. He was responsible for introducing me to the children of Henri Fruchaud and thus made available a treasure to the hernia surgeon. He also introduced me to Professor Hureau who was in charge of the Paris Inter-University Medical library and whose authority enabled me to obtain a most rare copy of the thesis of Bogros—a unique work on the retro-inguinal space that now bears his name (the space of Bogros) which I was privileged to translate and bring to our surgical community. Its acceptance and success have been legendary. Another instance of his generous nature was the provision of his archival material on Don Aquaviva, the father of the tension-free repair, a technique which has become the

mainstay of modern hernia surgery. His closest friend and colleague in North America was George Wantz, and together they promoted the GPRVS, the effect of which is felt by all and is especially emulated by laparoscopic surgeons. No surgeon was ever unimportant in his eyes. He acquiesced to so many demands of so many surgeons in so many ways that he can truly be said to have been a Surgeon of the World. His presence was always a guarantee of the eminence of any gathering and it was so when he graced the first conference organized in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Shouldice Hospital in 1995 and again at the first combined meeting of the AHS and EHS in Toronto which Professor JP Chevrel and I were privileged to organize. John Donne, the greatest English metaphysical poet was most sensitive when he penned "...never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee", for all of us.

To Mrs Stoppa and her children and grandchildren may the unanimous expression of respect of his entire team and the affection which was felt for him by all who knew him around the world, relieve some of the pain of this separation which he knew to be only temporary, so great was his faith. Professor B.F.K Odimba, a former student from the African Republic of Congo was most cerebral when he stated: "René Stoppa did not die. He can never die!"