

# In Memoriam

*Professor Dr. Germán Ochoa Amaya*

Following a brilliant career, Professor Doctor Germán Ochoa Amaya died in Bogotá, Colombia, on August 5th, 2014, at the age of 61. A highly regarded Colombian Orthopedist - Traumatologist and Spine Surgeon, he has left a wealth of achievements in the field of medicine, and a deep void in the heart of his family, his circle of friends, and the scientific and academic community worldwide.

His extensive career in medicine began in the classrooms of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, where he earned his degree with honors, for the title of Surgeon, in 1977. From that time, his life was marked by an enormous capacity for work, a deep respect for human beings, and an immense sensitivity towards his patients, and the needs and suffering of the society as a whole.

Germán, or rather, "prof." Ochoa as many of his students used to call him, was a warm, friendly man, despite the seriousness of his voice, which carried a hint of severity that lent a profound solemnity to his opinions and utterances. In his day-to-day activities, he was an easygoing man, tolerant, and respectful of all those with whom he came into contact. Always willing to help, generous in his dedication, and totally committed to his work. He was a perfectionist, even to the point of going beyond what would be physically tolerable for most human beings; in short, he was a special being, a passionate man endowed with many talents, including the ability to bring order, the lucidity of his thought, and the clarity and eloquence of his voice, characteristics that led him to become a man who transcended; a leader in every sense of the word.



His first steps during his pre-university years were devoted to social communication, through radio Santafé, a local radio station of Bogotá, where he served as announcer and presenter, tasks that he would later combine with his other passions, medicine and football. He was always devoted to Millionarios, the team of the capital city, and to the national Colombian team, which he had the opportunity to follow during several campaigns in the 1980s as a commentator for the then new television program, el Gol Caracol - which still exists today - and which he followed as a faithful supporter, to its most glorious moment in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

The 1980s defined his career, which was oriented toward social service through another of his great passions, medicine. He became a specialist in Orthopedics and Traumatology on the program of the Universidad Militar Nueva Granada at the Hospital Militar Central, in 1986. Between 1984 and 1988, while still a resident, and in his early years as a specialist, he shaped his profile as an enthusiast and expert in pathology of the spinal column, performing corrective surgeries as a fellow in Vertebral Scoliosis Pathology at the Centro Médico Nacional de México - DF in Mexico (1984) with Professor Héctor Peón-Vidales. He was a visiting fellow at the Hospital Germán Díaz Lombardo, also in Mexico City, under the instruction of Professor Eduardo Luque. He then participated as a research fellow in pediatric orthopedics and Spine Surgery at the Alfred I duPont Institute, in Wilmington, Delaware, USA. 1984 - 1985, with Professor G. D. Mc Ewen. His journey led him, in 1986, to become a visiting fellow in spine surgery at the Twin Cities Spine Center and Gillette Children's Hospital in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, University of Minnesota, USA, with Professors Drs. Robert Winter, John Lonstein, David Bradford, Francis Denis, Enzor Transfeldt and Jimmy Ogilvie. In the second half of the 1986, he became a visiting fellow of spine surgery and lumbar pain at the Toronto General Hospital of the University of Toronto, under the tutelage of Professor John Kostuik. Later, in 1988, he would become international fellow at the AO foundation in spine surgery, traumatology and lumbar pain, at the Kantonspital (Bern and Felix Platter Hospital, Basel, Switzerland), with Professors Max Aebi and Walter Dick, respectively, and finishing his training as a visiting fellow at La Pitié in Paris, under the guidance of Professor Roy - Camille. It was an extensive career that reflected his vocation for spine surgery, his firm determination to ensure he had the best preparation to provide the best care for his patients, and his conviction that education was a force with enormous power of transformation, particularly when put into the service of others.

Perhaps unintentionally, right from his days as a student, he was one of the first of those we now call citizens of the world, the capital of which was the Hospital Universitario Clínica San Rafael in Bogotá, where he worked for nearly 28 years, setting up the Spinal Pathology and pain management unit, where with patience and perseverance, he devoted himself to the care of thousands of patients, offering his expertise in spine surgery and also in the management of pain, which is the expression of the majority of problems and human suffering that were of such great interest to him. Meanwhile, he also dedicated himself to the education of hundreds of doctors who, as students, interns or residents of the Universidades Militar Nueva Granada, Juan N Corpas and El Rosario, had the opportunity to share with him. He was always lucid, thoughtful, deep in concentration, with a cup of coffee, sometimes silent, focusing on the analysis of each of his tasks, which were not always perceptible to us, for while we believed he was only attending patients, he was also carrying out other activities at the same time, that would have an impact far beyond the hospital, even beyond the city or the country, tasks at a global level that would only come to light with the passage of time, that he could develop in the place that became an extension of his home and his family : AOSpine.

His dedication and concern for academia, science and education soon put him in the position of a leader, where he was highly regarded, both in orthopedics and spine surgery, and among groups of specialists in pain management. He served as president of the Asociación Colombiana para el Estudio del Dolor [Colombian Association for the Study of Pain] - ACED, from 1993 to 1996,

and again from 1998 to 1999. He was president of the Sociedad Ibero-latinoamericana de Columna [Ibero-Latin-American Spine Society] - SILACO, from 1999 to 2001. From 1999 and 2002 he was president of the Federación Latinoamericana de Sociedades de Dolor [Latin American Federation of Pain Societies] - FEDELAT. In the same period, from 2000 to 2002, he was chairman of the Latin American Spine Committee of the AO - LASEC, and one of the founders of AOSpine Latin America; he was also coordinator of "National Action Network - Colombia" of Bone and Joint Decade 2001 - 2002. From 2002 to 2003, he was president of the Sociedad Colombiana de Cirugía Ortopédica y Traumatología [Colombian Society of Orthopaedic Surgery and Traumatology] - SCOTT. In 2003 he was appointed Chairman of the Spine Education "Task Force" for Central America and the Caribbean, of AOSpine Latin America. His activities extended beyond the region; he was a member of the Council of the International Association for the Study of Pain from 2010 to 2014, and acted as Chairman of the Educational committee of AOSpine International from 2011 to 2014.

He was the author of numerous articles and published texts focusing on problems in the spine and pain management, but his editorial activity was not limited to writing; he was also on the editorial board of magazines such as The European Spine Journal from 1999, and The Spine Journal from 2002 to 2014. His responsibility, his commitment, and his exceptional skill in management and entrepreneurship led him to participate in the organization of major events such as Spineweek in Porto, Portugal in 2004, and he was co-director of the AOSpine International courses in Davos in 2007, and director of the same event in 2012 and 2013. He was also co-director of the Global Spine Congress in Hong Kong in 2013. He participated as a member of the working group on educational initiatives of the IASP, and as a member of the project Bogotá sin Dolor [Bogotá without pain] of the FEDELAT, ACED and Bogotá District Health Department.

From the multiple positions that he occupied, he carried out important initiatives, such as the implementation of the first five-year plan for the government of the SCCOT 2003-2008. Among his achievements within AOSpine were the implementation of a faculty training program, the position of co-director, and the presentation, until just a few months ago, of a course that is run via a virtual platform, and is transmitted throughout Latin America, which is recorded in each corner of our region. But his most universal task was to promote the organization of the international spine curriculum, which is now applied in the education of this organization worldwide, and more recently, he left his mark on the spine module of AO Surgery Reference, an electronic tool that will become a text reference guide worldwide in the future.

Despite the dimensions of this herculean work, we must not forget that Germán was a family man, and a good son and brother, who set up a beautiful home with Patricia Abella (an anesthesiologist and algesiologist) with whom he had two sons, Germán David, aged 16 and Camilo Andres, aged 13. They were always in his heart and his thoughts, despite the distances. During his countless trips, whenever possible, they would receive a phone call in the evenings, from the furthest part of the planet, just to wish them goodnight, and on his return he would regale them with stories of the endless anecdotes and experiences gained through thousands of miles and hundreds of encounters with all kinds of people and cultures. In his most difficult task as an educator – that of a father – he instilled in them higher values, such as humility, honesty, respect and kindness, as well as a love of learning and education. His spirit and his mental strength is reflected in his children, who are the extension of his existence, whom he taught not to be afraid of the dark and not to lose faith, because there was always a light at the end of the tunnel, and a reason to go on. During the entire time the three of them supported him unconditionally, even sacrificing the physical presence of a husband and a father, in favor of a work that has benefited and will benefit generations of spine surgeons and patients worldwide.

Two and a half years after returning from one of his trips, he began the most grueling of his endeavors, when he received the news that he had cancer of the pancreas. He submitted to the treatment as he did with everything else during his life; with responsibility and total dedication, surrounded by his family. Despite the complexity of the challenge, in a demonstration of tenacity and courage, he did not distance himself from everything that constituted the essence of his life: the patients, the surgeries, the congresses, courses, conferences, meetings, etc., he was always active, productive, proactive, inexhaustible, full of energy, always firm to the end of the work, always the last to shut down the computer, or the last to sit down to dinner, always planning his next actions, to continue that eternal task of educating, always eager to tackle the next challenge with the same passion and fortitude as on the first day. Each time his impressive curriculum is reviewed, it is clear that in his professional capacity, and as a human being, he was able to integrate his immense love for science and his great skill as a communicator, interested in the use of technology, to reach out with greater impact to a large number of people, and his devotion to the human being, as a patient and as a student, in a mission called Medical Education, which he exercised with authenticity and intense passion.

Two weeks ago, as Germán David, his eldest son said, he undertook the journey that none of us wanted him to take, from which the body does not return, but that happens to all great men; it was a journey that led him to eternal life, and immortality within our hearts. Like many others around the world, I will miss him, but feel immense pride at having known him, and having been his student and his friend, having been infected by a little of his spirit, his passion for learning while teaching, and to understand that the limits of our achievements are only in our minds. I don't know how best to define him; as a teacher, as a warrior, or in essence as a great human being, as one of the good. Jaime Quintero, former president of the AO Foundation, on the day of his funeral, described him as a true level five leader, which means, in short, that he was type of person who is able to turn good into great. I hope there will be many more like Germán Ochoa in the world.

An eternal embrace,

*Jaime Enrique Segura Durán*  
Orthopedic traumatologist - Spine Surgeon  
Student and friend