

Arsénio Cordeiro: A Master of Portuguese Medicine

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Arsénio Cordeiro was a Master of Portuguese Medicine, thanks to his exceptional qualities as a physician, researcher, and professor, but most of all, his unique personality.

Arsénio Luís Rebello Alves Cordeiro was born in 1910, in Lisbon, and died in the same city in 1982. He was the son of a doctor, Dr. Arsénio Júlio Cordeiro, and nephew of a Master, Professor Sílvio Rebelo. He attended secondary school at the Liceu Pedro Nunes and graduated in Medicine at the Faculdade de Medicina de Lisboa (FML) with a score of 18 points. He had a brilliant academic career at the FML: he gained his PhD in 1947 with a unanimous score of 19 points; he joined the teaching body in 1950, gaining the title of “professor catedrático” (full professor) in 1958.

A man with vast experience, his profession as a doctor was paramount: he always put the patient first, with an approach in the biological, psychic and social senses. Like the master Morais David, he was an expert in the “art of diagnosis”: His diagnoses, always well-founded, were based on his great medical erudition, an anamnesis and a detailed objective examination. He performed many important roles in his career: full professor of Pathology and Medical Clinic; head of an Internal Medicine service; founding partner, secretary general, president and honorable president of the Portuguese Cardiology Society; partner of multiple scientific Cardiology societies (Spanish, French, Italian and English); fellow of the American College of Cardiology; representative of the Iberian Peninsula in the International Cardiology Society, etc. Despite performing such distinguished roles, right up to the end of his medical career, he always gave selflessly of himself, in the best service of the patient. He and his friend, the notable surgeon Professor Edmundo Lima Basto, were the first to perform heart surgery in Portugal: they began with ligation of the arterial canal and mitral commissurotomy. An understanding of the physiopathology of the mitral stenosis, and his sound



clinical judgment, enabled him to decide on surgical indication without resorting to cardiac catheterization. Also in his endeavors to best serve the patient, he managed to create, in 1969, with the support of the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, the Unidade de Tratamento Intensivo para Coronários (Intensive Treatment Unit for Coronary Patients) which today bears his name, the first to exist in Portugal and one of the first in Europe. It was complemented in 1972 by the Unidade de Cuidados Intermédios (Intermediary Care Unit). The creation of these units had long-term repercussions on the progress of medical intensive care in Portugal.

Arsénio Cordeiro was a defender and engager in scientific research, as he believed that even with scarce resources, correct methodology and persevering work always led to new knowledge, however small it may be. In his doctorate thesis, dedicated to Wolf-Parkinson-White syndrome, there was an experimental section, carried out at the Institute of Physiology of the FML, at that time directed by Marck Athias. Other research works were dedicated to auricular infarction, chronic “cor pulmonale”, and postcommissurotomy syndrome, and his investigations on the immunological aspects of sub-acute infectious endocarditis and disseminated erythematous

lupus had far-reaching international repercussions. He was the first to detect an immunological phase in infectious endocarditis, which led to an editorial in the *American Journal of Cardiology*.¹ The repercussions of his research works led to his presiding over numerous round tables at congresses in worldwide, for example: one on “Clinical Immunology” in Leyden (1971), another on “Immunology in Cardiology” at the European Congress in Madrid (1972) and another entitled “Practice in Coronary Units” at the European Congress of Amsterdam (1976).

Arsénio Cordeiro was a brilliant and effective professor in his lessons, whether theoretical or at the patient’s bedside. He had an uncommon medical erudition, an exceptional memory, clear reasoning and excellent dialectical ability. His lessons and diagnostic arguments enthralled his listeners with their content and form. All those who were his students or collaborators can testify to these characteristics. He had an enormous influence in preparing generations of future physicians who passed through the FML between 1947 and 1980.² He created a school of physicians and truly outstanding professors. His collaborators included, among others: Tomé Vilar, Carlos Manso, Nogueira da Costa, Fernando Laginha, Carlos Ribeiro, Nápoles Sarmiento, Freitas e Costa, etc. When discussing with his disciples, he never used arguments of authority; he was humble enough to admit when he was wrong, and he was subtle and elegant when he was right (which was most of the time), without ever flaunting his erudition and intelligence at the expense of his interlocutors.

Arsénio Cordeiro was a cultured man, who presented extreme elegance in his attitudes, conversation, manners, and style of dress. He had a great love of literature (particularly Eça de Queiroz) and classical music (especially Vivaldi). He dedicated himself to ichthyology (as a member of the International Bureau for the Classification of Fish), enology, and gastronomy (collaborating on the culinary treatise of Berta Rosa Limpo, mother of his friend Jorge Brun do Canto). He was a distinguished sportsman of great merit: a pioneer in the practice of skiing in the Serra da Estrela mountain range; a national champion swordfighter, in 1939; in 1952 he beat the world record for anchovy fishing with light tackle; in 1954, he beat the European record for white marlin fishing; in 1955 and 1958, he beat the European record for swordfish fishing.

His dedication to sport was reflected in the way he saw life, and his captivating personality, which was described by Juvenal Esteves as follows: “The personality of Arsénio Cordeiro was always perfectly defined in content, and clearly outlined in incontestable profile. When, in any circumstance, his incontestable profile is mentioned, it is easy to identify him. A lively and physically active man, good-humored, mentally and intellectually healthy, happy, enthusiastic, competitive, but disciplined, persistent in action, who lived life to the full”.³ His character never changed, even in his suffering during the latter months of his life. Perhaps the best definition of the man and the physician that was Arsénio Cordeiro, in the words of Juvenal Esteves,⁴ is: a character-force of soul, moral firmness and coherence in his actions.⁵

The author of these lines, a disciple and collaborator of Arsénio Cordeiro from 1959 to 1980, thanks Dr. Barros Veloso and Dr. Luís Dutschmann (also a disciple and collaborator of Arsénio Cordeiro) for being given this opportunity to pay homage to Master Arsénio Cordeiro, a personality that most fascinated him during his life. ■

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