

Prof. Augusto Pais da Silva Vaz Serra

Francisco Severo

It was with deep and sincere emotion full of gratitude and missing the Professor, that I accepted writing a few words on what was the university and caring activity by the illustrious Prof. Augusto Vaz Serra, paying this way my last tribute.

For over two decades, I had the privilege of interacting with him on a daily basis and the happy opportunity of admiring his high qualities of intelligence, competence, knowledge and his unequal clinical perspicacity, allied to a working capacity which has enriched all who had the privilege of working and interacting with him.

Prof. Vaz Serra, son of Jose Antonio Vaz Serra, a Graduated in Mathematics and Philosophy, and of Delfina Pais da Silva, was born in Coimbra, Borough of Sé Nova, on the 5th June 1905.

He attended primary school in Santa Isabel School and in Celas State School, attending secondary school in S. Pedro School with distinction.

In 1920, he entered Coimbra Sciences Faculty, where he concluded the Medical preparatory course and in the following year, he was enrolled in Coimbra Medical School, finishing his degree in December 1926 with high scores, reason why he received awards in almost all subjects.

In 1927, after a written exam, he was appointed Assistant to the 9th Group (Internal Medicine) practicing Medical Clinic, under Prof. Adelino Vieira de Campos de Carvalho, until 1938, when this distinguished Professor, he admired so much, passed away. He has also cooperated with other famous names of Portuguese Medicine, Prof. Antonio Luis Morais Sarmiento and the missed Professor Alberto Moreira de Rocha Brito.

In 1928, he presented his Academic Doctorate defending the dissertation “Tratamento do Mal de Pott: Modalidade cirúrgico” [Treating Pott’s Disease: a surgical approach], debating as well two theses: “A Curabilidade da Perfuração Pleuro-Pulmonar Tuberculosa” [Curability of Tuberculosis Pleural Pulmonary



Perforation] and “Interpretação Patogénica da Esquizofrenia” [Schizophrenia Pathogenic Interpretation].

At the age of 25, after a public exam, he was appointed Assistant Professor to the 6th Group (Internal Medicine) on the 4th August 1930, re-assuming the same role on the 10th August 1933 until March 1941.

In January 1940, he was in charge of the Faculty Council on the subject of Dermatology and Syphilography, and in March 1941 he was hired to take the role of Full Professor, being definitely appointed on the 7th May 1942.

In 1942, he is appointed as Head of Medical Pathology and at the same time, as Clinical Director of Coimbra University Hospitals. He carried out such

role until the end of 1961.

On the 8th January 1962, he became Chairman of Medical Clinic until the 5th June 1975, date when due to legal imperative he was jubilated.

Honorary titles: Doctor Honoris Causa by the Medical School of Brazil University (Rio de Janeiro 1959), *Grande Oficial da Ordem da Instrução Pública* in 1967 (Portuguese Honorary Award for Public Service on Education) and awarded by the Vatican with St. Sylvester Order.

During his forty eight years university career, Professor August Vaz Serra, in a constant concern of updating his knowledge, he made many study trips, both as a personal initiative as in official mission, to Medical Services in Spain, France, Belgium and Italy. In Germany, he was for a few months where he underwent a thorough preparation in Dermatology and Syphiligraphy. He cooperated and attended several Medical Congresses both in Portugal as abroad.

He was an active member of a high number of judges for Doctorate exams, Associate Professor, Adjunct Professor and Full Professor in Medical Schools of Coimbra, Lisbon and Oporto.

On the school year of 1950/1951, he presented the "Oração da Sapiência" under the heading "A Medicina de Hoje e de Sempre" [Medicine of Today and Always].

He had multiple roles in the many departments of Medical School, a total gift of a tireless worker: Interim Director of the Pathological Anatomy Institute (1942), Librarian to the Medical School (1951-1955), Director of the Medical School (1956-1974), Director of the Clinical Analysis Laboratory (1965,1967,1970), Director do the Radioisotopes Laboratory (1965-1970), Director of the Physiological Chemistry Institute (1967) and Clinical Director of Assistance Service of Coimbra University Hospitals.

In 1953, he was in charge of organizing a course in Goa Medical School (at the time, Portuguese India) and in April 1967, he went to Mozambique to organize the General Studies, the Clinical Services supporting the teaching of the 4th grade of the Medical-Surgical Course.

In 1942, he was appointed a member of the committee in charge of reviewing the solutions assumed by the National Care to Tuberculosis patients.

He was a professor in the Course of Climatology and Hydrology, chairing the subject of Hydrological Therapy from 1955 to 1961.

He was Chairman to the Portuguese Society of Internal Medicine (1956) with an outstanding dedication to his role.*

He was a speaker for the Nuclear Energy Committee in 1954 and a member of the Consultation Board in 1959, 1962, 1966 and 1970.

In 1957, he was appointed a Member of the Consultation Technical Committee for the construction of the School Hospital, near the Administration Board of the University Town Works Plan.

He was appointed in 1970, a member of the Improvement and Review Committee of the Portuguese Medical Association.

He was a corresponding member of S. Paulo Medical Academy (Brazil), associate to the Société Française de Gastro-Stomatologie and the Portuguese Chairman of the American College of Chest Physicians.

Many of his works were published in Portuguese journals – *Portugal Médico*, *Medicina Contemporânea*, *Lisboa Médica* and *O Jornal do Médico*. But it is *Coimbra Médica*, a journal he was the owner, director and editor from 1954 to 1974, which keeps in its pages most of his scientific work. His "Notas Clínicas" [Clinical Notes] are well known and remembered, full of originality and prolific in the teachings conveyed. The publication of "Erro de Diagnóstico" [Diagnostic Error] is still today a work of remarkable literary quality and pleasant reading; in it, are transparent his outstanding professional qualities and nature of a true Internist.

With his own style of living and interacting and a humanistic view to solve problems related with patients, students and disciples, Professor Augusto Vaz Serra, innate academic, he has respected and was respected and esteemed by his peers and honored with dignity, competence and unsurpassable dedication his Medical School to which he brought so much prestige.

Has a teacher, having unusual gifts of intelligence and clear rhetoric, we remember the respect and high appreciation he was held because of his exceptional and model theoretical and practical classes, always full of students and listened to with understandable enthusiasm. The Master could "read" his patients, as

*During the 4 years period as a SPMI Chairman, Prof. Vaz Serra opened the school years of 1956 and 1959 with two lectures called "Direitos e aspirações da Medicina" [Medicine Rights and Aspirations] and "O Erro na Clínica" [Error in Clinical Practice]. Both were published in the Boletim da Sociedade Portuguesa de Medicina (no. 5 and 7).

nobody else did.

Apart of the prolific work training future doctors, he guided and took to doctorate Prof. Antonio Jose Amorim Robalo Cordeiro, an exponential name in Portuguese Pneumology, Jose Freitas Tavares, a qualified Hematologist, so missed, and Joaquim Rodrigues Branco, already jubilated, a Professor of Physiological Chemistry and a great enthusiast of Nuclear Medicine in our School.

Professor Augusto Vaz Serra has, undoubtedly, created a true school.

On the 29th May 1956, the new building of Coimbra Medical School was inaugurated and in charge was the Director, Professor Vaz Serra, who carried out such role until April 1974.

It was with an exemplary dedication and outstanding enthusiasm he fought for, encouraged and helped to improve the services already in place, and to create new research sectors that brought great progress to Medical Science in Coimbra.

Such extraordinary man has soon realized the enormous interest of Nuclear Medicine, namely in the morpho-functional study of different organs, but also the use of radioisotopes for therapy purposes. Therefore the need to create a Radioisotopes Laboratory has emerged, which was implemented at a later stage (1959) with the cooperation of Prof. Branco, Professor Joao de Oliveira e Silva, who offered the premises of his Institute of Physiological Chemistry, Professor Joao Jose Pedroso Lima, Professor Tice Anastacio and Dr. Dario Cruz.

The Medical School holiday courses and the “Quinzenas Médicas”, started by Prof. Joao Porto, had in Prof. Vaz Serra a worthy follower who for three decades gave them all his enthusiasm, affection and strict organization, conquering a prestige for all recognized whilst training students and doctors in the central region of the country.

As a Director of the Anti-tuberculosis Health Centre Doutor Adelino Vieira de Campos, he developed for many years, a valuable activity fighting tuberculosis, which at the time, was an actual social flagellum, revealing to be a formidable phthisiologist. This is reiterated by the wide number of patients who benefited from his help to whom the illustrious physician never spared any effort.

It was not only in the domain of Pneumology that such activities were noticeable. Gastroenterology, Endocrinology, Hematology and Neurology were also

departments of Internal Medicine which deserved his always attentive and opportune intervention, result of a deep reflection upon his problems.

In 1985, Coimbra Médica, under Prof. Adelino Marques guidance paid him the due tribute. The Professor, at 80 years of age, has given his last lesson, called “Iatrogenic Disease”.

How rewarding it was listening to him, developing such a current issue, which deserved to be included in a subject in our school! What a wealth of knowledge, what clarity of thoughts and how appropriate mentioning them! They emerged with a simplicity worth of a man who thinks, reflects and advises with the authority coming from his long clinical practice.

His honesty and humbleness were again present in the words of gratitude, in S. Marcos Palace, and I do not resist transcribing them:

“Life is only a process in continuity. And it is in such hope that each one should give one’s best”.

Also the gratitude to his masters was not forgotten:

“At this moment, listening to the words addressed to me, I feel that beyond the individual, is the series of those who preceded him and naturally were in his training”

Unfortunately, Prof. Vaz Serra was losing gradually his sight until becoming totally blind. It was extraordinary the dignity with the Man, always lucid, accepted this life misfortune without a complaint, a regret or revolt. I am convinced that his religious conviction many helped.

At 89 years of age, on the 31st December 1994, Prof Augusto Pais da Silva Vaz Serra left us, leaving to us his work and indelible memory of the remarkable academic and internist. ■