Maurice E. Müller (1918-2009)

Maurice Müller died peacefully at the age of 91 on 10th May 2009. His unquestionable and revolutionary prominence in the field of orthopaedics and skeletal trauma was recognised by SICOT, who in 2002 awarded him the accolade of “The Orthopaedic Surgeon of the Century, whose achievements and success have exceeded all others”.

He was awarded Honorary Fellowship of the British Orthopaedic Association and of The Royal College of Surgeons of England, as well as receiving the highest level of affiliation and incorporation of most respected surgical bodies worldwide.

Maurice Müller was born in Biel, Switzerland in 1918 of a German father and a French mother. The French language and culture impacted greatly on him throughout his life. At the age of 18 years, he started his medical studies in Lausanne. Around that time, inspired by an old French book on magic, he became a progressively more skilled illusionist, readily amazing friends with baffling sleight of hand performances. I remember how, when taught on the AO courses in London, he would entertain us with trick after trick. Despite the proximity imposed by a crowded pub, none of us could see how he wrought his magic.

He graduated from medical school in 1944. During a locum position in Bern, after seeing a man with an intramedullary nail who had regained full function after a femoral fracture, he set out on the path which led him to revolutionise fracture care. At this time, when proximal femoral osteotomy, with attendant shortening of the leg, was the standard treatment for coxarthrosis, he developed a profound interest in the field of arthroplasty of the hip.

Early in his surgical career, he started work at the most conservative Balgrist Clinic in Zurich. Somewhat dissatisfied, he responded to an appeal for surgeons to go to Ethiopia. En route in 1946, in Marseille, he bought a collection of old surgical texts which he studied with enthusiasm. This knowledge, together with his ‘magical’ hands, crafted an exceptional young surgeon. He returned in 1947 to work in Liestal, and then as Oberarzi back at the Balgrist, visiting widely surgeons in Europe. In 1949 he read “Théorie et Pratique de L’Ostéosynthèse”, published by Robert Danis. He visited Danis in March 1950, and returned fired up with the concepts of immediate functional rehabilitation of the extremity, leading to full recovery.

In 1951 he took charge of trauma care at the University Hospital, Fribourg. His first 75 patients with absolutely stable internal fixation and immediate functional mobilisation had a negligible complication rate and the results far exceeding the predictions of his detractors, who regarded his fracture surgery as over-aggressive and iconoclastic. His career rapidly unfolded and Professor Francellon of the Balgrist gave the young Müller carte blanche to develop further his evolving principles of osteosynthesis and to devise the implants and instruments to serve those ends. Soon after, he presented his results, and was condemned as crazy by the Swiss surgical orthodoxy.

In 1952 he converted his friend and fellow surgeon, Robert Schneider, and they persuaded a number of Swiss surgical colleagues of the need to investigate bone healing scientifically, and to develop systems of implants and instruments to serve their emerging surgical concepts. This led, in 1958, to the formation, by a group of Swiss surgeons, spearheaded by Maurice Müller, Robert Schneider, Martin Allgöwer and Hans Willenegger, of Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Osteosynthesefragen - later to be known as AO. At his insistence, AO set up the first Documentation centre in Davos in 1959, a technical commission (AOTK) to monitor development, quality control, clinical safety and outcome. He served as its chairman for over 20 years.

In 1960 Maurice became chief of the new St Gallen clinic, with the biggest trauma department in Switzerland, where he also set about creating a series of total hip prostheses. In 1967 he moved on to become Professor of Orthopaedics at the new University Hospital in Bern, which, because of his genius, attracted many surgeons seeking orthopaedic training, and numerous patients seeking orthopaedic care. In the same year, he created the Protek Foundation to manage the royalties from the sales of his hip implants and instruments, and thereby to fund further research and education.

In 1970, with the University of Bern, he constructed 35 Murtenstrasse, housing the Maurice E Müller Foundation, a hip surgery documentation centre with research and teaching facilities. It was here that the renowned Bernese Hip Courses were held.

The illustrious career such of Professor Maurice Müller is beyond the few words of this brief tribute. There are those who can speak of Maurice the husband, the father, the friend, the philanthropist.

As well as receiving a constellation of honours and peer tributes, he was, inter alia, a founder member of the International Hip Society, President of SICOT, co-recipient of the Marcel Benoist prize of Switzerland with Martin Allgöwer and Hans Willenegger, and became the first ever Honorary Citizen of the city of Bern. He endowed the MEM Foundation in Spain and in North America, and several Chairs of Orthopaedic Surgery.

His passion for evidence-based surgical practice, led to the gold standard Müller/AO classification of long bone fractures.

Maurice Müller was a giant, and a legend. He leaves the surgical arena an intellectually richer field than before he arrived in it.

Professor Chris Colton

References