Fernando Figueira: Brazilian Public Health Champion

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“Consciously or not, a man can only be truly fulfilled when he forgets his individuality, when he ascends and projects himself as an integral part of the immense social body to which he belongs.” - Fernando Figueira

Few individuals have done more to advance maternal-fetal health in South America than Fernando Jorge Simão dos Santos Figueira. He was born on February 4, 1919, to Brazilian parents who were living in the Portuguese city of Figueira da Foz, where his father, Joaquim Simão dos Santos Figueira, was receiving treatments for visual loss that were not available in Brazil at that time. Fernando Figueira grew up in the state of Pernambuco and graduated in 1940 from the School of Medicine at the University of Recife — today the Federal University of Pernambuco.

For the first 7 years of his career, Figueira worked as a general practitioner in the small municipality of Quebrangulo in the interior of the Brazilian state of Alagoas, where he developed an interest in pediatrics. In 1948, he moved to São Paulo, where he became an Assistant Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at the University of São Paulo. He was a visiting professor in Mexico, the United States and France from 1958 to 1960, before returning to Recife and joining the Federal University of Pernambuco as Professor of Pediatrics.

Together with several colleagues in Recife, in 1960 Figueira founded the “IMIP”: the Instituto Materno Infantil de Pernambuco (Mother-Child Institute of Pernambuco), which would become his major legacy. After the Institute grew to become a major regional comprehensive medical center, the name was changed to the “Instituto de Medicina Integral Professor Fernando Figueira”, retaining the IMIP acronym. Today the IMIP has 1,000 beds and cares for more than 600,000 patients annually.

Figueira was an early proponent of breast feeding and a constant advocate of child and maternal health, especially among the poorer population. He was also a strong champion of education, and insisted students respect the dignity of poorer patients.

During a period of military dictatorship in Brazil that began in 1964, a decree was passed requiring universities to identify and expel students who might be “political subversives”. In 1969, during the dictatorship of Artur da Costa e Silva (1899-1969), 37 medical students at the Federal University of Pernambuco were identified by administrators as “political subversives”, but Professor Figueira fought strongly against their expulsion and they were allowed to continue their studies. In 1978 he became Dean of the School of Medical Sciences at the Federal University of Pernambuco and in 1982 President of the Brazilian Association of Medical Education.

Figueira founded several cultural and medical organizations, including the Hematology Center of Pernambuco (HEMOPE) in 1974, and in 1987 he founded a social support program named after his mother, Maria Alice Pedrosa Figueira. Among other political leadership roles, he served as Health Secretary during the administration of Pernambuco President Eraldo Gueiros (1971-1975).

He was known as a tireless worker, stating, “Do not ask me what I have done for poor children in my land, which is almost everything possible, but ask me why I have not done more. I will reply by saying that I have really done little compared...”
with what I intended to do, and this has become a lasting torment. When I see the misery in which hundreds still live, I feel the need to constantly begin my life’s work anew.”

Professor Figueira received numerous honors including Commander of the Order of Malta. The first breastfeeding advocacy center in São Paulo, Centro Fernando Figueira, was named after him. He died in Recife on April 1, 2003, at the age of 84. Since 2003, the Brazilian Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) public health system has awarded the “National Professor Fernando Figueira Award” to an outstanding champion of pediatric health.

Brazil issued a 1st class commemorative stamp in 2019 to celebrate the 100th anniversary (Scott catalog number pending) of his birth. The stamp’s inset is the medical complex in Recife named after him.

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