On December 4, 1927, Emile Letournel was born in the archipelago of Saint Pierre et Miquelon, France, located south of Nova Scotia. In his youth, his uncle taught him carpentry and he became facile with a saw, a skill that served him well in his later life as an orthopedic surgeon. After finishing secondary school in Saint Pierre, he obtained a scholarship to the French Institute in London (which had been temporarily moved to Scotland due to World War II) and crossed the Atlantic alone on a troop ship in 1944. At the time of his journey, he spoke no English, and had never seen a railroad train or visited a large city.

In 1946, a few months after the end of the war, Emile went to the University of Paris to study medicine. He developed an interest in orthopedic surgery. To apply for a postgraduate position to continue his education, he had to visit all of the relevant faculty members and present letters of recommendation, but he had no letters to present. A friend recommended that he see Professor Robert Judet (1909-1980). After a cursory interview, Judet offered Letournel a 6-month position beginning in 1956, despite his lack of letters. This 6-month trial soon became a permanent appointment as Judet’s assistant at Hôpital Raymond-Poincaré in Garches, a residential community in the western suburbs of Paris. Judet’s research focused on pelvic fractures, so Letournel began to study these as well.


Letournel advanced to the rank of Professor at the University of Paris in 1970 and became head of the Department of Orthopedic Surgery at the Centre Médico-Chirurgical de la Port de Choisy in southeast Paris. He remained at Choisy — a non-profit hospital — until his retirement in October 1993.

Letournel soon became the best-known acetabular surgeon in the world, training numerous young physicians and regularly hosting visiting colleagues. He developed a database for the statistical analysis of both immediate and long-term results of treatment of acetabular fractures, published dozens of articles, and organized the first acetabular fracture educational course in Paris in 1984. In addition to his classification system for injuries, he developed 2 major surgical approaches (ilioinguinal and extended iliofemoral), innovative fracture reduction techniques, and instrument and implant designs that continue to be used in many orthopedic operating theaters.


Letournel’s contributions to orthopedics were not limited to acetabular fractures. He implanted the first knee prosthesis in France in 1968, performed more than 6000 total hip arthroplasties, devised a scapulothoracic arthrodesis technique for patients with fascio-scapulohumeral myopathy, developed
implant designs and surgical techniques for management of calcaneal fractures, and regularly performed operations for bone infections.

He was admitted to the French Académie de Medicine et Chirurgie in 1981 and received the Legion d’Honneur from President François Mitterrand in 1988. He became known to the French general public after he operated on several Formula 1 race car drivers, including Jacques Laffite and Didier Pironi, and other notables such as the great chef Michel Chabran.

On August 16, 1994, at the age of 66, Emile Letournel died unexpectedly. Shortly before his death, he completed his 1050th surgery for an acetabular fracture. Following his death, his name was given to the Lycée and a street in Saint Pierre et Miquelon. Emile Letournel was honored philatelically by Saint Pierre et Miquelon in 1999 (Scott #676).

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Potential Competing Interests: The authors report no competing interests.

Correspondence: Address to David P. Steensma, MD, Department of Medical Oncology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, 450 Brookline Ave, Suite D1B30, Boston, MA 02215 (david_steensma@dfci.harvard.edu@DavidSteensma).

ORCID
David P. Steensma: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5130-9284; Robert A. Kyle: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4763-4580