Dimitrios G. Oreopoulos—May He Rest in Peace

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Dimitrios Oreopoulos, a unique colleague and friend of many in the renal community, died in April 2012, in Toronto, Canada. The international renal community mourns the loss of his wisdom, kindness, and enormous contribution to the field of peritoneal dialysis. He was one of the most recognizable and beloved nephrologists across the five continents; a gifted physician, scientist, educator, and mentor.

Oreopoulos was born in Alexandroupolis, Greece, in 1936. He grew up in Athens in a large supportive family, which gave him the strength, simplicity, courage, perseverance, and dignity after the early loss of his father. The last time he had visited his mother, Antigone, in Athens, she gave him the following advice: “My child, help others as much as you can even at your own cost.” Oreopoulos effectively applied this admonition from his mother throughout his life. As a physician, he was always on the side of people seeking assistance, regardless of whether they were patients, students, colleagues, nurses, relatives, countrymen, people of different religions, foreigners, and even totally unknown persons.

The contribution of Oreopoulos to the field of peritoneal dialysis is simply enormous. Of his 473 papers listed in PubMed, his last was published in May 2012. His role in the evolution and worldwide spread of the method of continuous ambulatory peritoneal dialysis is writ large, and for 35 years he covered the world as a visiting professor. His research activities in basic and clinical nephrology were innovative, pioneering, and extensive. The Peritoneal Dialysis Unit at the Toronto Western Hospital was a strong educational attraction for nephrologists, researchers, and nurses from around the world.

Oreopoulos served medicine with passion and dedication. As a physician, he was benign, smiling, and eager to hear, to touch, and to help. Bending with affection and compassion over the sick, he shared the anxiety and concerns of each one and their families. His approach to patients was holistic. He was interested in not only the health of the body, but also the spirit of his patients. This remarkable attribute led him to found Humane Medicine, an international journal for health professionals involved in providing holistic and human care for patients. He believed that the core of medical practice is in the interpersonal relationship between doctor and patient and the best medicine that doctors can give to their patients is of themselves.

The character, personality, and integrity of Oreopoulos also united the Greeks in Toronto to realize an old dream of the Greek community, the Greek Home for the Aged. His Greek-Canadian traditions also included placing a Hippocrates marble burst with his Oath at the entrance of the main auditorium of the Medical School of Toronto, establishing the first Greek Orthodox day school in Ontario, and establishing the Greek-Canadian Medical Association called Hippocrates. His love for Greece was also expressed daily through his general attitude, behavior, and sincere practical interest for everything Greek.

Among his many and important academic distinctions is the honor of establishing the Oreopoulos-Baxter Chair, a
university chair at the Medical School of Toronto that bears his name and is dedicated to research in nephrology. He also was the recipient of the Belding Scribner Award (1998) and an award in geriatric nephrology (2012) from the American Society of Nephrology. Despite his numerous and important distinctions, honors, and prizes, virtually from all corners of the globe, Professor Oreopoulos remained a simple, modest, and very sensitive man who worked hard and was very strict with himself. Basically, he lived ascetically without luxuries. He was satisfied with little food, very limited sleep, and only the necessary clothing. Humility was one of his greatest virtues.

Oreopoulos harbored great respect for his teachers. For his mentors, Hippocrates Yatzides, Mary McGeown, and Abraham Rapoport he felt enormous gratitude that he tried to reciprocate among his colleagues. In a speech given as an honorary Doctor of Medicine at the University of Thessaloniki, Oreopoulos said:

Blessed with three mentors in my academic life, I wanted to give everything that I received from these three people to over 100 young nephrologists, who honored me by becoming my students and colleagues. When I am helping my students, one of my expectations is that they, in turn, will help other, younger doctors. We must embrace teaching and share our experiences and knowledge with our younger colleagues. Specific skills and experience gained in a particular area of medicine become even more valuable when shared with our less experienced colleagues. I see this as a part of our journey.

He had all of the characteristics of a good mentor and confidant. Above all, he was a teacher. Oreopoulos had the stuff of great masters. Through his attitude and behavior, he was teaching ethos, consistency, and commitment to the legitimacy and the rules of morality and law. Whether in the auditorium, at the patient’s bed, at conferences, and through his articles and journals, Oreopoulos showed us the way to knowledge and how to learn. Beyond his erudition and experience, we were taught by his undivided love for everyone, by the innate politeness, and altruism unpretentiously gushing from his wonderful inner self. A great number of people in different disciplines, for many years, were the recipients of his generous and continuous supply of friendship.

In September 2011, when he made the great and painful decision to stop seeing patients and to close down his office, he managed to arrange everything. He completed all of his patient files and ensured their follow-up by appropriate colleagues, made sure his secretarial staff found new jobs, and gave away everything that was in his office and bookcases. He called or emailed hundreds of persons he was in contact with and informed them about his impending death with courage, and without regret.

Oreopoulos completed his autobiography in 2009, in which he stated the following:

Looking back, it is amazing how fast 40 years (1969–2009) have passed. Still they were all so exciting despite the ups and downs. At the same time, it all has been so blessed with a nice family with four nice children, help of patients locally and internationally and recognition by my peers. Although often I say that I wish I could do it exactly the same once more, I believe I should be satisfied with what I did with the talents God gave me... In the process I hope to become freer and less fearful of the unknown.

I am sure that in the end, 3 years later, he left prepared and fulfilled.

DISCLOSURES
None.

REFERENCE
1. Oreopoulos DG: From Starvation in Greece to... Peritoneal Dialysis in Canada: What an Exciting and Blessed Life. Available at: www.oreopoulosdg.ca