

Professor Ismael Mena, MD

Juan J Touya.



Professor Ismael Mena, MD

“Grief is the price we pay for love”.

Today we have to say farewell to a patriarch, a pioneer scientist, a teacher, a care provider, an innovating journalist, and a former editor of our electronic journal: Dr. Ismael Mena González. He passed away on February 15, 2015, at the age of 86, after a long fight with prostate cancer. He passed away peacefully, surrounded by his wife María de la Luz, their four children and in-laws, and several of their grandchildren.

Ismael was son of Ismael Mena Rivera, a professor of pathology at the Universidad de Chile, and Raquel González Förster. He was the oldest of 9 children. His youngest sister said: “he was a role model for the other 8 children of the Mena-González family”. For Ismael, his role models were his grandfather and his father.

He was educated at the Deutsche Schuler, in Santiago (Colegio Alemán de Santiago) and at the St. Ignatius School of the Jesuits (Colegio San Ignacio, Santiago). He learned to be a disciplined, hard worker in the Deutsche Schule, and a lover of God and logistic person at the Jesuits’ school. In 1954, he graduated as Medical Doctor at the School of Medicine at the University of Chile. He was the best student of his generation.

After graduation, he married María de la Luz Gatica Morel, “the most beautiful Chilean lady” as I often heard him say. They were married for 61 years and formed a very prolific family: four children, eighteen grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. My grandmother used to say: “behind a successful scientific man are always the sacrifices of a woman fully dedicated to him”. The Mena-Gatica couple truly conformed to this French idiom.

After graduation, he was appointed as an Assistant in the Department of Internal Medicine at the Catholic University of Chile and in the Department of Endocrinology of the Chilean Army. Interested in the uses of radiotracers in endocrinology, he accepted a UCLA invitation for training in the use of radioisotopes in medicine. At UCLA, he met Leslie R. Bennett, MD (Bob), the Director of the Nuclear Medicine Clinic, who became his mentor and a good family friend. Bob Bennett used to say that Ismael was his best and more creative collaborator. After three years in UCLA, he returned to Chile and founded the Department of Nuclear Medicine at the Catholic University in Santiago. He also founded the Chilean Society of Nuclear Medicine and became his first President.

In 1964, in association with George Cotzias and Sergio Fuenzalida, he started studying neurological disorders in Chilean manganese miners. He and his associates discovered that chronic manganese poisoning induces parkinsonism, and they discovered that, like Parkinson’s disease, chronic manganese poisoning parkinsonism improved with L-DOPA. This research, which was initiated in Chile, was finalized at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, New York. It was probably his most important and original scientific contribution.

At the end of his work at Brookhaven National Lab, Bob Bennett offered him the position of Professor-in-Residence at the UCLA School of Medicine and Director of the Nuclear Medicine Division at the UCLA-Harbor Medical Center, in Torrance, California. For over 21 years, he fulfilled these academic positions admirably, educating nuclear medicine specialists and nuclear cardiologists from all over the world. He worked with radiotracers of ultra-short life in cardiology and assisted instrument manufacturers in the perfecting of their instruments. He developed procedures to measure functional brain flow using Xenon, HMPAO and ECD in patients with brain degenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer’s disease, and in patients with psychopathic personality disorders. And these works are de basis of the newest uses of NeuroSPECT imaging.

In 1994, he returned to his motherland and worked at the Nuclear Medicine Clinic of the prestigious Clínica Las Condes, in Santiago, Chile. Four years later, in 1998, he was appointed Chief Editor of the Association of Latin American Societies of Biology and Nuclear Medicine (ALASBIMN). As Chief Editor of ALASBIMN, he re-created the ALASBIMN JOURNAL, the first electronically published scientific journal in Latin America.

A favorite hobby of Ismael was golf, which he played every weekend he could with his sons and sons-in-law. His academic life was crowned twice: first, in 1995, with the title of Professor Emeritus of the UCLA School of Medicine; and second, in 2004, with the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the Auvergne University, France. He also received honor distinctions from ALASBIMN in 2002

(Santiago, Chile) and 2005 (Montevideo, Uruguay). Another crowning achievement occurred during his 60th wedding anniversary, when María de la Luz and Ismael were appointed Deacons of their church.

The memory of a good person is a blessing (Proverb 10:7).

Juan J. Touya, MD, PhD.

Retired Professor of Radiological Sciences, UCSF,

Doctor Honoris Causa, Facultad de Medicina, UDELAR

Former Chief editor of the “Revista de Biología y Medicina Nuclear. ALASBIMN