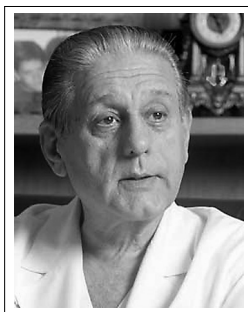


A glorious life and a tragic death: Dr. René G. Favaloro (1923–2000)

Rene Geronimo Favaloro was born to Sicilian immigrant parents on 14th July 1923 in La Plata city, the capital of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. His father was a carpenter and young Rene frequently worked with him in his workshop. His idol was his uncle, a family physician, at whose prodding he entered the Medical School of La Plata University, where he graduated in 1948.



During the next 12 years Favaloro worked as a general physician in Jacinto Aráuz and in 1950 married Maria Antonia, who became his life-long love and partner. In this small rural town of La Pampa province he built his own laboratory facilities and had X-ray equipment and an operating theatre. His fascination with thoracic surgery led him to apply, at the relatively ripe age of 40, for a Fellowship at the Cleveland Clinic. At first he could only become an "observer" here, but later, at Dr. Effler's invitation, he joined his open-heart team.

At that time Mason Sones and his team had already performed hundreds of selective coronary arteriographies at the Cleveland Clinic. Favaloro was fascinated by the accuracy of this method in pinpointing lesions in the coronary arterial tree. This is not the place to describe earlier attempts by Dr. Effler and his team to provide surgical solutions for narrowed and blocked coronary arteries, but Rene Favaloro's proposal that the saphenous vein be used as graft to "by-pass" a coronary lesion was revolutionary. Favaloro performed the first such operation on May 9, 1967. The success of this and of subsequent "by-pass" operations, especially those using the left mammary artery, demonstrated clearly the immense value of these new procedures.

Rene Favaloro worked at the Cleveland Clinic at the same Unit until 1970. During this period he became known worldwide, lectured at the most important international meetings and even performed by-pass operations as a guest surgeon over-

seas, most famously, at the invitation of Dr. Donald Ross, the first coronary by-pass surgery in England at the National Heart Hospital of London. Favaloro, known for his modesty, always pointed out that the pioneering spirit in Dr. Effler's department, the development of coronary angiography under Mason Sones and the collaboration between these two men were essential for his achievements.

In June 1971, disregarding important offers received from elsewhere in the USA, Rene Favaloro submitted his letter of resignation to Dr. Effler. He returned to Argentina, where he worked as Director of Cardiac Surgery at the Güemes Hospital, which became the most important medical centre for the whole of South America. Here in 1980 he performed the first heart transplantation in Argentina. In the late 1970s Rene, together with his brother Juan Jose, created and developed the Favaloro Foundation for Research and Education, built the Institute for Cardiology and Cardiovascular Surgery that opened on July 1992 and in 1993 established the Favaloro Institute Medical School, which in 2000 became the Favaloro University. Favaloro achieved exceptional popularity in Argentina. In opinion polls 70% declared that they would vote for him as President, and he was offered the position of Minister of Public Health several times, but he never accepted a political or official nomination. His public image was that of altruism and dedication to the underprivileged, a man respected and beloved by the people.

On July 29, 2000 Rene Favaloro died by his own hand. We now know the most plausible explanation of this unexpected tragic deed. The Favaloro Institute had run into a large deficit and his plea for help had fallen on deaf ears. In mid-July 2000 he even applied to the President of Argentina for financial help for the Institute, but by the day of his death no answer had yet come. Proud and sensitive,

Favaloro could not tolerate what for him was a matter of unbearable personal failure.

The impact of his death on the people of Argentina has been striking. He had demonstrated his love to his country by leaving his personal interests in order to return there and to contribute to making its cardiology and surgery one of the best in the world, and his country returned his love and affection. He was not only cherished in Argentina for being a heart surgeon of worldwide renown, but he was looked upon as an educator and writer and a historian who had written several books. In his

last years his main lectures had been devoted to social problems, such as the Paul D. White Lecture delivered at the 1998 American Heart Association meeting, which received a standing ovation from five thousand cardiologists. Those of us who had the privilege of working with him and those who knew Rene Favaloro in person hold fond memories of him, recalling his bedside manner, his devotion to his work and his sacrifice to his fellow human beings. We all remember him as a great surgeon and a great physician but, above all, as a great man.

Branco Mautner and Sergio Dubner
Buenos Aires, Argentina