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Obituary

Professor Michel Bourel

Michel Bourel, one of the founders of French hepatology, died suddenly at the age of 87 on February 21, 2008 leaving several generations of medical doctors and scientists who were nurtured by his example, orphans.

Michel Bourel attended the medical school at the University of Rennes, France. In 1946, he was awarded his internship in Paris, and later in the recovering French capital, started an enthusiastic training period that he liked to remember as a key time for both his personal and professional achievement. During his residency, he received a comprehensive training in internal medicine and, in the meantime, wrote his first book entitled *Questions de physiologie*, together with his close friend, Serge Bonfils. Then, joining the *Hôpital Cochin* and the *Institut National d'Hygiène* – the forerunner of

the *Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale* (INSERM) – he carried on with his clinical and scientific training and emerged among the leading professors who became the founders of both the current French network of University Hospitals and modern biomedical research in France.

In 1952, Michel Bourel came back to Rennes where he showed his talent as a founder of great projects. He was appointed Professor of Therapeutics in 1954 and Professor of Clinical Medicine in 1958. Together with his alter ego Jean Pecker, Professor of Neurosurgery, he founded the Rennes University Hospital. Thanks to his strong background in internal medicine, his rigorous intellectual framework, his insatiable scientific curiosity, his impressive skills in organization and his national network, Michel Bourel attracted and trained several

generations of fellows who became leaders of hospital departments throughout Brittany and France. Along with Jean-Pierre Benhamou at *Hôpital Beaujon* in Clichy, he contributed to the development of French hepatology which was emerging with the constant goal of establishing a cross-talk between bedside medicine and bench research. His medical unit was re-named the “Clinics of Internal Medicine and Hepatology”, genetic haemochromatosis being the link between both specialties. In 1968, he founded the first INSERM Unit in Brittany with the visionary objective that understanding liver diseases requires cellular approaches and tight links between clinicians and basic scientists. In so doing, he anticipated the modern concept of “translational research”. In 1976, he contributed to establishing the French Association for the study of the liver (AFEF). In the early 1980s, he encouraged the members of his team towards international recognition, namely Marcel Simon for the genetic investigation of haemochromatosis and André and Christiane Guillouzo for their pioneering work on cultured human hepatocytes. In 1987, he received an award from the New York Academy of Sciences.

In 1987, at his retirement, Michel Bourel bequeathed a unique clinical care, teaching and research unit to his successor, Pierre Brissot. He was then elected to membership in the “Académie Nationale de Médecine” in Paris where he started a new stimulating period, enriched by new contacts and new fields, from cell biology to biotechnol-

ogy, innovative medicine and...archaeology. Attending the weekly session every Tuesday of the “Académie” in *rue Bonaparte, in St. Germain des Prés*, he never failed to share his projects and knowledge with his colleagues and close “students” in Rennes, supporting their careers and scientific endeavours.

Michel Bourel has been an architect and a visionary leader, constantly seeking to bridge medicine and research. He pioneered the emergence of hepatology in France and built a remarkable scholarship based upon rigorous training, focused projects, translational approaches, networking and ethics. With discretion and style, he has continuously supported his fellows, leading them to their highest achievements while remaining in the background at the time of their honours. Michel Bourel aimed at essence and refinement rather than fame.

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