

RECOLLECTION ABOUT WERNER FORßMANN AS A SURGEON

Abdul José Delfino¹ and Pedro Saracho Cornet²

¹Clinic of Cardiosurgery, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Córdoba, Argentina

²Clinic of Pediatric Surgery, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Córdoba, Argentina

Abstract

The impact of Werner Forßmann on his clinical team during his time at the Protestant Hospital in Düsseldorf is described. Many residents came from foreign countries, especially from Argentina. The daily work of the clinics is depicted and the character of Werner Forßmann as a surgeon is understood from his education.

Key words: Werner Forßmann – surgeon - Argentina

Without a doubt, invasive cardiology found its origin with the first catheterization of the heart, realized in 1929 by Werner Forßmann. Being limited initially to the diagnosis and evaluation of heart diseases, this method of treatment has continuously changed into a wonderful method of therapy of heart and vascular syndromes, as well as in other organic areas of pathology. The endoluminal methods, the future development of which is still unpredictable, have become in several fields a successful competitor of surgery, as certainly will be the outcome of the present symposium in Eberswalde.

The stay of foreign residents in the surgical clinical department of Werner Forßmann in the Protestant Hospital of Düsseldorf included a very important impact on relationship to countries in particular to Argentina, Iran, Turkey, and Spain. The period of residency of one of us (Abdul Delfino) began in August 1961 and lasted for about two years. It was an unforgettable experience and provided a possibility to deepen the knowledge previously acquired in Argentina.

As host surgeons, we were received by Werner Forßmann very heartily, making our start very easy. He was a very sensitive person, who was understanding and friendly, as he proved especially as a host at the side of his excellent wife Dr. Elsbeth Engel in his home close to Neuss. He stimulated those around him in the solid belief that learning is something essential in the life of any physician.

Werner Forßmann urged me (A. Delfino) to make a weekly visit to the Hemodynamic Center of Prof. Hans Bolt in Cologne, where we edited a scientific paper which was published. He understood the intention to extend my education towards thoracic and cardiovascular surgery in the surgical clinic of Prof. Ernst Derra, head of that clinic at the Düsseldorf Academia. In this Department, I could not only acquire the basis and concept for the later development of cardio-

surgery in Argentina but also several scientific publications and my doctoral thesis were also realized.

As a physician, Werner Forßmann was highly acknowledged by his patients to whom he transmitted confidence and hope for their healing. The patients greatly estimated his title as a Nobel prize winner. He listened to his patients, sharing their problems and he closely followed the precise course of their complaints and their outcome.

As a product of a time in which today's diagnostic techniques were not yet developed, he was extremely fond of the necessity of the clinical investigation. He intensified the observation in order to decide on an adequate therapeutic conclusion. This was certainly acquired from his teachers who had a profound influence not only on his education but also as a medical doctor with practical work in a time of poor resources. This resulted especially during the execution of his profession in the Black Forest during the difficult post-war years where he was mostly guided by the principle of charity. In the time lapse of surgical aspects after 40 years, it is not easy to imagine the principles of methods and techniques which have developed so considerably. We realized that the methods used in our clinic corresponded to the state-of-the-art of this time which was also used in other clinics. This is the case for general surgery, traumatology, bone surgery, and urology which were practised in the clinic of Werner Forßmann in Düsseldorf. Without any doubt the surgeons at this time were much more aggressive than is the case nowadays. Furthermore, the residents had to follow exactly the rules of the surgical procedures which were proposed by the chief. For this reason, we were once criticised very intensively because of too small incisions for operations. "Mr. Delfino, you have to carry out the operation as it is done in our house," said Werner Forßmann, "Furthermore, I would like to remind you that great surgeons are recognised by great incisions."

In spite of this, Werner Forßmann was very confident with Argentinians, as he expressed several years later, remarking that he considered them as "diligent and reliable co-workers in any situation". Personally, we had the opportunity to carry out a great number of operations which allowed us to receive recognition as specialists for surgery from the German board.

Now some recollection concerning the so-called "chief visit". This was a chapter in its own right. One walked through the wards at a very fast pace and with considerable tension. The "chief visit" was, without a



Fig. 1. Werner Forßmann and his operating team relaxing during a recreation break in the room next to the operating theatre. To right of Werner Forßmann the operating nurse Inge Ströver and his chief resident Dr. Schäfer. A. Delfino is the second on the left side of Werner Forßmann.



Fig. 2. Typical tension during the "chief visit". A. Delfino on the left of Werner Forßmann on his hectic walk through the ward.

doubt, an obstacle which had to be confronted at least once a week. Everything was observed, not only the medical aspects of the patients, their case reports, but also the discipline, the cleanliness and so on. Nobody was sure what would happen. The chief showed all his authority and strictness based on his Prussian education. Several examples show the situation during such visits.

One could see a very quiet Werner Forßmann in his recreation pause in the afternoon (Fig. 1) and Werner Forßmann during the chief visit under great tension (Fig. 2).

Looking back to the past, we can be extremely grateful to Werner Forßmann because, as a foreigner,

he has guided us in a certain direction and also educated all foreigners to develop the activity which we can execute as a cardio-surgeon and pediatric surgeon. In Düsseldorf, we received the fundamental education based on which we could establish our activities after a difficult start. As a result a lot of things could be achieved.

We would like to stress that for all the work carried out in Germany we have not only acquired the fundamental concept and knowledge but it was also of great value for the discipline, moral motivation, and belief in the executed profession. For this reason, we have a great respect for Werner Forßmann and his country. We wish to thank you for the invitation which has enabled us to give our recollection of Werner Forßmann at this symposium in Eberswalde.

Received: January 10, 2006 / Accepted: August 14, 2006

Address for correspondence:

Prof. Dr. med. Abdul José Delfino
Clinic of Cardiosurgery
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba RA
Calle Pedro J. Frías 138
X5000ECB Córdoba
Argentina

Prof. Dr. Pedro Saracho Cornet
Clinic of Pediatric Surgery
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba RA
Pasaje Ernesto Bosch 750
X5011CFJ Córdoba
Argentina
e-mail: EurJMedRes@t-online.de