

GC

GUEST COMMENTARY

E. P. C. M. S.

A Tribute to Dr. Albert Cuetter

Khalid I. Afzal, M.D.

It was 7:55 am and I could see a never-ending sea of red taillights moving with an arduous sluggishness. The down town exit of I-10 was truly rendering an entangled portrayal of its alias 'Spaghetti Bowl'. 'They must have heard about the accident at Geronimo', I thought out loud, 'Everything is going to be okay'.

In spite of Dr. Albert Cuetter's reputation as an excellent teacher, I was dubious about my first impression presumptively being late on the very first day of the Neurology rotation. It was already 8:12 am when I arrived at the door of the Neuroconference room in the basement of the El Paso Psychiatric Center. It was partially opened and I could see someone sitting cross legged with a small piece of colored chalk in his right hand tapping on the table with a melodious rhythm. I gently knocked at the door with the nail of my right index finger. 'Come in', a casual voice emerged. With my background of a foreign medical graduate and belonging to a culture where professors have attained a self acclaimed guise of the 'High Priests' if not being 'Divine' altogether, seldom visible to the masses and that too with all the paraphernalia of 'the Holiness', it was shocking for me to see Professor Albert C. Cuetter, M.D., head of department of Neurology at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center-El Paso sitting alone in the room seemingly immersed in some deep thoughts. Mutual greetings were exchanged and the morning lecture commenced, no questions asked.

The next two months rotation was a life time experience for me. I followed Dr. Cuetter like a hungry duckling, throughout the day, ready to acquire anything and everything from his extensive experience spreading almost 5 decades in the field of neurology. He became an inspiration and role model for me through all the aspects of training. I re-learned the art of practicing medicine like a person who thought he knew driving just by reading books and then someone acquainted him with the accelerator, the meaning of the right of way or rules of changing lanes in the expressway and above all how and where to stop. Accompanying him through different floors of Thomason hospital helped me witness a new meaning of the word respect, as seen through the eyes of the janitors, the administration staff, the aides, the nurses, the medical students, the residents, the faculty and above all the patients and their families. Being on the receiving end of all this respect and honor has only made him more humble and down to earth. One can find him walking around in the most inconspicuous manner, in the corridors, the hospital elevators, the clinic building or the wards, with his medical instrument bag tucked in his left arm and his white lab coat usually unbuttoned, looking may be somewhere on the

ground in front of him, seemingly unaware of the surroundings in a light everyday trance. He might look at you and rendering a complimentary subtle smile would say, 'Que `tal', evoking in residents like me, the feelings of a soldier who gets elated at the personal gesture from a general officer.

His style of teaching is so eloquent and unique that the listener remains totally unaware of the experience, yet gathering a lot. He is a master of using simple tools like a paper and a pen or a chalk and the board, or the modern devices like power point presentations, to simplify complex neuronal circuitry and its associated pathologies and meanwhile giving a whole new dimension to the old concepts. I never observed him getting upset by the inaptness or impertinence of any question. His usual style is to listen attentively and fully and then putting everything on a paper, like the pieces of a puzzle and solving it bit by bit in his engaging Spanish accent till the inquisitor is completely satisfied.

Dr. Cuetter received his medical degree in 1963 from the University of Cartagena, Colombia, and took his residency training in neurology and fellowship in electromyography and electrodiagnosis from 1965 to 1969 at Northwestern University Medical School, Chicago. He has the honor to serve in the United States Army Medical Corps for over 20 years and received numerous awards for his exceptional services to the country. Among others he received The Army Commendation Medal, The Meritorious Service Medal and The Legion of Merit during his tenure in the Army. Due to his ongoing affection with the academics, he offered his assistance to the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center and initiated a collaborative Neurology rotation for the medical students and the residents at William Beaumont Army Medical Center in 1984. After getting retirement from the Army in 1990, he accepted the full time clinical professorship at Texas Tech and became the founding father of the neurology department. Since his arrival at the campus, he had been getting the Outstanding Teacher Award from the medical students consistently for over 20 years. He has numerous publications to his credit that cover a span of almost 40 years. Due to his ongoing research in the field, he is considered an authority in the neurological manifestations of neurocysticercosis, which is a disease caused by the infestation of the worm *taenia solium* in the central nervous system. At the neurology department he is appreciated as a father-figure. His moments of distemper are considered to be insubstantial and momentary like the fog on the glass, when present may seem a lot but when clears in-

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A Tribute to Dr. Albert Cuetter (continued)

crease its sparkle!

Despite getting the chance to practice in the private sector, Dr. Cuetter chose to offer his services to the under-served population of the El Paso community at Thomason hospital. He always goes one extra step in the care, welfare and education of his patients and their families. Dr. Cuetter's inherent humaneness, passion, compassion and indulgence in his practice are exemplary. He is a consistent advocate of change in the existing healthcare system and never hesitates to point the flaws in the managed care based healthcare.

At his stage of professionalism, practice of medicine does not remain just a practice but witnesses its metamorphosis into a behavior. A behavior where one sees through the eyes of medicine,

hears through the ears of medicine, touches through the hands of medicine, feels through the heart of medicine and more so breathes through the lungs of medicine. His ongoing contributions have attained him such a legendary stature that he has become an unforgettable part in the history of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center and Thomason hospital. I hope that he continues to be a source of inspiration, stimulation, and motivation for the future generations of the medical students and the residents as well.

Khalid I. Afzal, M.D., Department of Neuropsychiatry, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, El Paso, Texas.