

In memoriam

Juan José Rufilanchas Sánchez



Distinguished cardiovascular surgeon Juan José Rufilanchas Sánchez passed away on 31 January 2025. I never actually worked with him beyond coauthoring research articles and an occasional foray into the operating room at *Hospital Universitario 12 de Octubre* at his invitation. However, we met back in the 1970s at a European congress in Barcelona. He was there with a group of budding surgeons and perfusionists from *Clínica Puerta de Hierro de Madrid*, and our paths crossed in a popular restaurant in Barcelona, where he was dining with his entire team while enjoying the live entertainment. I still recall the lively exchange of amusing anecdotes at the table. That evening sparked a connection with them all, evolving from a professional tie into an enduring friendship. And already back then, there was *Rufi*, cigarette in hand, the unmistakable leader.

As a trainee surgeon, and for what was to be half a lifetime, he was fortunate to follow in the footsteps of a great maestro. Diego Figuera Aymerich, one of Spain's leading cardiologists, had transitioned from thoracic to heart surgery. Rufi's career ran parallel to that of the founding figures of cardiology, Gregorio Rábago and Ramiro Rivera, and others who joined them shortly afterward, such as Carlos Durán in Pamplona, Miguel Puig Massana in Barcelona, and Norberto González de Vega in Andalusia. Rufi was a pioneer in surgical electrophysiology, a field in which Joaquín Márquez would later gain international recognition.

Trainees at *Clínica Puerta de Hierro* became his close colleagues, some sharing a similar age, others a destination: Gabriel Téllez and Juan Ugarte stayed in Madrid, José María Caffarena moved to Valencia, Julio Agosti left for Bilbao, and Manolo Concha worked as head of service in Córdoba for many years. Younger colleagues, including Alberto Juffé and Eduardo Otero, along with many others such as Barcelona-trained José Manuel Revuelta, now form part of the brilliant history of cardiovascular surgery in Spain.

When his colleagues left for Córdoba, A Coruña, and Valencia, Rufi became a leading figure for many in Madrid. He left a lasting mark at *Clínica Puerta de Hierro*, not only as one of the most prestigious cardiovascular surgeons in the city but also as an academic and innovator, working together with José Luis Castillo

Olivares and his collaborator, Mr. Polo, fathers of the modern operating room.

He was among the first Spanish cardiovascular surgeons to be admitted to leading cardiology societies outside Spain, including the American Association of Thoracic Surgery (AATS). Back then, gatekeeping practices made entry difficult without strong academic and personal connections. To join the European Association for Cardio-Thoracic Surgery (EACTS), for example, candidates had to be endorsed by 2 established members in addition to meeting publication criteria. Even submitting manuscripts to the societies' journals required a written recommendation from an active member.

In addition to his ongoing work training junior doctors, Rufi had a unique vision of the future of the specialty from the outset and was openly critical when he felt things were not being done as they should. At one point, he even resigned from the National Cardiology Board [*Comisión Nacional de la Especialidad*] in protest over decisions made by board members under pressure from government bodies. His disagreements with other surgeons or administrative staff were tense and contentious at times. In fact, internal problems during his time as head of the Cardiac Surgery Service at *Hospital Universitario Ramón y Cajal* led him to move to what is now *Hospital Universitario 12 de Octubre*, where he remained, again as head of service, until his retirement from public practice.

At *Hospital Universitario 12 de Octubre*, Rufi left an indelible impression by transforming the cardiac surgery service into a leading center in Spain and Europe. He was at the forefront of advances in heart transplantation, circulatory support, and pulmonary thromboendarterectomy. Pulmonary thromboendarterectomy interventions were then continued by José María Cortina, and as a result, the hospital became the highest-volume center in Spain, with *Clínico de Barcelona* close behind. Rufi also played a key role in turning *Hospital Universitario 12 de Octubre* into one of the most sought-after cardiovascular surgery placements for trainees in Spain and fellows abroad.

We often met at national and international conferences as colleagues, sometimes even traveling together as friends, and consequently, I can confirm that we have lost an excellent surgeon deeply appreciated by his patients, a magnificent cardiologist and teacher, and a good golfer and card player. A man marked by the grief of losing his wife, Fio, yet unwavering in integrity and character. A character we will never forget.

May he rest in peace. And, Rufi, if there is an afterlife, keep it a smoke-free zone. We'll see you there.

José Luis Pomar

Instituto Clínico Cardiovascular, Universidad de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Available online 16 May 2025