

Open Letter to an Exemplary Cardiologist and a Man of Integrity: Dr Cortacero

Dear Friend:

I write these words to you when less than 48 hours ago we laughed together while making plans for the future. Today, suddenly and without prior warning, that future has met with death. You have left for ever. You have been betrayed by the very same heart that was so full of energy when it came to giving yourself to others. Who would have thought that after 30 years of repairing hearts, it would be your own that would take you away from us, leaving us with ours in pieces!

Life had already caused you to suffer cruel blows on numerous occasions and you knew that pain comes uninvited at the most inopportune moments. Therefore, I won't overwhelm you here by talking about the suffering that your loss causes us, nor telling of the emptiness that is left among your colleagues at Hospital de Valme; in life you felt the amount of love we had for you and you can imagine, from where you are now, the intensity of the pain that your departure causes us. Consequently, I will write this letter in the same tone as our daily conversations: direct, straightforward, clear, relaxed, and without ambiguities, just as you liked it.

Firstly, I want to make it clear that I write this letter not only to pay tribute to a friend but also to fulfill a duty that I believe we all have, to let others know about individuals who have based their lives deeply on ethical principles and values. I promise that there will be no exaggeration in my words; in fact, more than writing, I will simply transcribe in words what you wrote in actions. The best tribute I can pay to you is to show that your example has been useful.

I would like to highlight some of your virtues, first among these, your courage. As Victor Hugo said, "to dare" is "the price of progress." You dared to leave a well-established hospital with everything in place to go to another that was young, enthusiastic and full of life, but in which there was a great deal of work to be done. You accepted the challenge and you completed it: in record time, you built an elite center, trained the personnel, personalized relationships, and produced admirable results in terms of both quality and quantity. Congratulations rained down on you, but you did not become vain, because you were motivated more by the honor than the honors. I can now say the things that were not put into words at that time: you cannot imagine the joy it gave all of us to see how we, or really you, achieved excellence with what had been dismissed by some as small.

But that is not all. I remember that we needed an interventional cardiologist but we wanted one who fit the profile of a humanitarian. You fit that profile. When you arrived at the hospital you were not known by your colleagues working in other areas. Within a few months you had gained respect and credibility from all as a result of your straightforward style, your elegant conduct, your friendly treatment of others, and your helpful attitude.

It was apparent from the outset that you were different, that as one of the best in your field you had not fallen into the trap of attributing mythical status to the possibilities of the techniques; you knew perfectly well that they do not eliminate suffering by themselves. You provided technical medicine, efficiently and conscientiously. It bothered you when you were referred to as a "superspecialist." Once again, you showed an attitude that was deeply philosophical: "A pure specialist is no more than an intellectual hemiplegic" (Ortega and Gasset). You practiced complete medicine.

A colleague said to me whilst we talked of our memories of you that you looked happy among us. I agree. You seemed very happy in our group, especially when you talked of your son Gonzalo and your wonderful wife Pilar. But your happiness had not been simply given to you as a gift; all happiness demands a substantial investment of energy and you, dear José, had simply earned it. Let nobody be mistaken, happiness does not come for free.

But I have something else to say to you, dear friend. I must be sincere. When I heard the broken voice of our friend Juan Beltrán giving me the tragic news on Saturday morning, I admit that I was initially somewhat dazed. It was so unexpected. But in a moment I remembered the words of the writer: "The fool fears death and runs from it, the madman seeks it out, and the wise man awaits it." You were one of the latter. And certainly, when a life is taken that is full of humanity, that is not focussed on "me," and that is giving of itself to others, wise people expect the end. This was your way of understanding the profession and I genuinely believe that you accepted it; for this reason, I believe that although you did not seek out death, neither did you fear it, you simply awaited it.

I nevertheless find it strange to talk about your death. Can a person be considered dead when they remain alive in the hearts in which they became so deeply held? This is neither the time nor the place for

philosophy, but I truly believe that to die having lived and served may not be to die completely. No, José Cortacero, you have not died for us. From this day onwards, our catheterization laboratory, yours, carries your name, the spirit in which you built it continues to live within it, your memory is our stimulus, your project is now ours, and your example we take as our guide. We are going to work hard to ensure that your hopes are fulfilled, and we will do it not only for you but also with you, because you will always be with us.

Dear José, we have reached the end of this letter but not of this story. We are not saying goodbye to you, we are counting on you. We simply say thank you and we are always with you. From wherever you are, please help us. With love, Luis.

Luis Pastor Torres, on behalf of all members
of the Cardiology Department,
Hospital de Valme, Seville, Spain.