

Paloma Aragoncillo

Paloma Aragoncillo was born on 24 September 1947 in Tétouan (Morocco), at a time when it was still a Spanish colony. Her parents came from comfortably well-off, intellectual families from the mainland city of Málaga. Her father was a follower of Manuel Azaña Díaz, the second and last president of the Second Spanish Republic; her mother, a supporter of General Franco. Both were great readers, making her home a genuine crucible. In 1959, following Moroccan independence, the family moved to Madrid, which meant the adolescent Paloma had to adapt to a huge change in her environment. On completing high school she did not hesitate for a moment in choosing to study medicine. This certainty in her vocation accompanied her throughout her life. At the age of 20, when she was studying at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, her mother died. Paloma, the youngest of six, had to take charge of the home. From being the youngest sister, she became the mother. She fulfilled this role for several years, successfully combining it with her university studies and, in many ways, continued to play the same role, extending it to nephews and nieces, great nephews and great nieces, up until her death.

At a very early stage, Paloma opted to study pathology and was an intern in the pathology department during her undergraduate years. Her postgraduate studies were in the Pathology Department of the Hospital Clínico de Madrid. Very quickly, she came to enjoy studying the heart, despite the fact that an experienced pathologist told her it was not the best way to earn a living. Profesor Zarco transmitted to her a vocation for cardiology. He introduced her to Dr Torrent-Guasp, and thus she had the opportunity of working with him at his home in Denia, cooking cow hearts and analyzing "the cord" with great curiosity.

In 1980, she presented her doctoral thesis entitled "A morphologic study of the lymphatic capillaries and microcirculation of the blood in the experimental myocardial infarction", which received the highest possible award.

In 1981, Paloma spent time at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, Alabama, with Spanish cardiac pathologist Dr Ricardo Ceballos. At that time, Dr Kirklin was the head of heart surgery and, as the surgeon of reference, he operated on complex congenital cardiomyopathies, valvular heart disease and coronary heart disease. Paloma was able to delight in directly observing heart



surgery performed by a group of the most exceptional surgeons – known colloquially as KKK: Kirklin, Kouchoukos and Karp, but not to forget Pacifico.

Paloma returned to Madrid and put into practice the carefully-learned techniques for dissection of the heart, major vessels, coronary arteries and conduction system, that she later went on to perfect. She defended the unquestionable importance of autopsy as a diagnostic technique for cause of death, as well as for structural study. Although physically fragile, until the onset of symptoms of her fatal illness, Paloma continued to perform autopsies personally.

At one time, her Madrid hospital was without a pathologist and Paloma had to take on the study of the veins removed in varicose vein surgery. This, which might seem routine and boring, later served for her noteworthy analytical studies of saphenous grafts.

Teaching was a fundamental part of her daily life, first in practical classes and later as an associate professor. After many years of teaching, she continued to prepare her classes with the same dedication and interest as at the beginning of her career. The testimonies of her students bear witness to her attitude as a genuine master-teacher.

In Spain, the world of cardiology has delighted in her wisdom and untiring work, both in specific

consultations and in careful, laborious studies conducted throughout her life. She always had time to attend to her students, residents, physicians, and other researchers. Her publications in the most prestigious cardiology journals are proof positive of the scientific quality of her work. She also collaborated with scientific professionals from other fields, both in medical (suffice it to say, she worked with the distinguished nephrologist Dr Carlos Caramtheo) and in basic research, where she worked with engineers (her own brother Cipriano), among others.

Delving into her profile as the bonding agent in her family, it must be said that she truly assumed and played the role of mother and, later, grandmother. At her death, her brother, 12 years her elder, said to me, "Camino, I feel like an orphan". Such was the warmth of the relationship she maintained with her family. During her fortunately short illness, she enjoyed the timely, devoted company and unstinting dedication of all of her family.

From her parents, Paloma inherited her fondness for reading. She did not enjoy sporting activities, and preferred her terrace garden, sewing, cookery, and books, were dear leisure-time companions for her. However, her very favorite pastime was interacting with children and teenagers, in whose company she delighted and who she ensured delighted in being with her.

Since her death, two of her publications have already appeared: one in *Circulation*, by the Interventional Cardiology team at the Hospital Clínico de Madrid and cardiologists at the Hospital Puerta de Hierro, with Dr J. Escaned as first author;

another, a monograph on the aorta, published by the Spanish Society of Cardiology, coordinated by Dr Isidre Vilacosta. Dr Vilacosta, a very close friend of hers, comments in a written tribute that he learned through Paloma's eyes and that she knew how to live with the "dull" role that is frequently attributed to pathologists even though some of her preparations have travelled right round the world.

To take an opportune roll call of each and every one of the clinical and basic researchers she has collaborated with is a difficult and delicate task, above all due to the risk of forgetting someone. Consequently, I shall refer to the hospital teams with which she had close relationships: the Transplantation and Interventional Cardiology team at the Hospital Puerta de Hierro, Madrid; the Electrophysiology team at the Hospital Ramón and Cajal, Madrid; the Nephrology team at the Fundación Jiménez Díaz; and the Surgery, Electrophysiology, Interventional Cardiology, Clinical Cardiology and Basic Research teams at the Hospital Clínico, Madrid. Please forgive me if I have left anyone out. She would never have done so, as she had an enviably good memory and great respect for her colleagues.

Palomí, Spanish cardiologists are delighted to have known you and enjoyed your presence. We keenly feel our loss of you, both as a human being and as a professional, fields in which you still had so much to do.

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