

# Professor Robert Derom, 1922–2009

By Fernand Leroy

Honorary Professor, Free University Brussels

It was with much sadness that we learned that on July 29 our friend Professor Robert Derom had passed away in a fatal accident crossing a railway track, reminding us of the death of Gustav Adolf Michaelis, the great obstetrician of the 19th century. Fortunately, it seems that death came so suddenly that Robert did not have the time to suffer.

Born in 1922, Robert Derom was medically predestined as his father, Professor Firmin Derom, was head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the state University of Ghent. Robert followed the steps of his father whom he lovingly admired and obtained his MD in 1946. He became successively a postgraduate student in O & G, a resident, and finally, a senior registrar, between 1946 and 1965. In 1965 he conquered the title of 'agrégé de l'enseignement supérieur' (an official degree enabling one to teach at university level).

One of the prominent results of his thesis, which dealt with fetal acidosis, has become common knowledge. Nowadays it is indeed well known that the second-born twin almost systematically shows relative lower blood oxygenation than the first one and that, therefore, his birth should not be unduly delayed. This finding stimulated Robert's interest in twins, which became a life's passion for him. He soon realised that one of the main shortcomings of twin research was the inadequate examination of placentae in many maternities. Therefore, most research studies did not distinguish between MZ and DZ, nor between mono- and dichorionic twins. Robert Derom was among the few who realized the importance of this differential diag-

nosis, and published several papers stressing the importance of placental examination.

The vast majority of the 150 or so papers and reviews that Robert published during his career were focused on twins. They ranged from purely obstetrical to endocrine, epidemiological and genetic aspects of twinning.

In 1964, this focus led to the creation of what has become known as the 'East Flanders Prospective Twin Survey' (EFPTS). Its founders were professors Robert Derom and Michel Thiery (a twin himself). This databank gathers detailed information on obstetrical circumstances, placentation, newborn physical characteristics, epidemiological, genetic and even psychological information on almost all East Flanders multiple births. Since its creation, a permanent flow of publications on these various topics has emanated from this register, which has attracted a large panel of investigators from various disciplines. In due course, thanks to the collaboration of Robert Derom's daughter Catherine, who is a geneticist at Leuven University, DNA identification of zygosity was added to the EFPTS register's data.

Robert Derom has had a dense career, not only as a professor and investigator in O & G, but also as a skilled and persevering organizer of many symposia and congresses on twinning and perinatal pathology, both nationally and overseas. In 1974, he was also among those of us who founded the International Society for Twin Studies (ISTS) at the Gregor Mendel Institute in Rome. Ever since, Robert Derom has been one of the best examples of the application of the Society's motto: 'Twins for Science, Science for Twins'. Between 1996 and 1999



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he was President of ISTS, in 1998 founder and first editor of *Twin Research*, the official journal of the Society, and in 2007 he organized the 12th International Congress on Twin Studies in Ghent, Belgium.

His nationwide success rates led to international awards, such as the Jaspar Prize of the Agency for the Care of Mother and Child, Honorary Member of the Italian Society of Perinatal Medicine, Fellow 'at eundem' of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and Honorary member of the Belgian Society for Reproductive Medicine.

Unlike his father, who was a definite extrovert, Robert was a quiet and unobtrusive gentleman, always very polite and self-controlled. No one ever saw him openly angry, and the best joke elicited at most a discreet chuckle from him. His demeanour was such, that arriving in a delivery room where pandemonium had broken loose because of some major obstetrical complication, he would very calmly and politely

ask for a pair of gloves to assess the situation. This had the immediate effect of enabling everybody present to regain their composure.

Robert Derom was nevertheless a warm and understanding person, always ready to help someone in difficulty. Visitors and friends were

always welcomed by him and his charming wife Monique in their ancient mansion called *Notax*, located in the countryside near Ghent. We would like to convey our warmest sympathy and condolences to his wife and to their three daughters and son.

As written by the renowned Flemish poet Guido Gezelle:

*To be content is a gift*

*To look content is an art*

*To live content is luck*

*To die content is a masterpiece*

## Emile Papiernik, 1936–2009

By Birgit Arabin

With sadness and grief we must accept that a very unique colleague, mentor and friend, who had dedicated his life to the prevention of babies born prematurely, has passed away. In his lifetime he realized his dreams and goals; without losing his gentleness, he was fulfilled with tenacity, and due to his dedication he has improved human, technical and organizational perinatal care not only in France, but in the world. His death is too early for all who loved and estimated him and we agree with the comment of Madame Uzan in the French *Le Monde*:

Figure majeure de l'obstetricque française est mort, samedi 8 août à Sceaux à l'âge de 73 ans. Il nous a fait voir le patient non comme un dossier mais comme un être humain à prendre à sa globalité (Morin, 2009).

Emile Papiernik was born in Paris in 1936. Together with his wife Martine he had three children and six grandchildren. When asked why he became an obstetrician, he answered, 'I have chosen my field of interest in the 6th year of medical studies by discovering the emotional power of a birth; I was the husband of this mother and the father of that child and had never previously been the witness of a birth. I was, at the same time, fully aware of the enormous technical discordance of the obstetrical practice compared to the techniques

available in other fields, but only the use of a stethoscope for obstetrics in 1962. I suspected that the wave of progress would soon reach obstetrics, and that I could be involved as an actor in that wave, and this was effectively what happened' (Papiernik, 2004).

Emile Papiernik was trained in Gynecology and Obstetrics in Paris. At the age of only 36 years he became chairman of a teaching department at University Paris 11 at Clamart and began to fulfil what he had decided during the delivery of his first child, namely to improve the social, medical and technical care for pregnant women and their babies. Later Emile became a professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Paris 5 at Port Royal, where he remained until 2002.

In 1969, Emile Papiernik introduced a program 'Dare to care' for the prevention of preterm births through the use of systematic screenings (risk scores) and changes to the daily work patterns and lifestyles of pregnant women (Bouverot et al., 1963; Kaminski & Papiernik, 1974; Papiernik, 1989a, 1989b; Papiernik & Kaminski, 1974). Thanks to his impact, the French government decided in 1970 to introduce a nationwide policy aimed at the prevention of preterm birth and developmental handicaps in children. This policy was evaluated by the French National Institute of Health and demonstrated a reduc-



Emile Papiernik at a walk through Assisi on the footpath of Francis and Clare who are famous for their vision and care during a twin conference in 1999.

tion in preterm birth rates from 8.6% to 5.4% between 1972 and 1988, mainly for women with risk factors related to demanding occupations. The nationwide success rate of this policy (Papiernik, Bouyer et al., 1985) helped to convince obstetricians all over the world to improve the quality of pregnancy care and led to international awards, such as of Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Honorary Fellow of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and Honorary Member of the American Society for Maternal–Fetal Medicine.