HOMAGE TO JAIME CELESTINO DA COSTA

Today the Faculty of Medicine is greatly pleased to carry out a duty: to pay homage to Professor Jaime Celestino da Costa, giving his name to a whole area of pedagogical intervention for the teaching of surgery.

This fact, unfortunate only in its being overdue, also attempts to symbolise a concept dear to the man to whom we are paying homage: the essential unit of surgery, of its culture and philosophy of action, for the good of patients and also as a space for scientific dialogue among the different branches of the “surgical tree”. This view of surgery, which will also be applied to internal medicine, is a concept we ought to preserve as the structuring mainstay of undergraduate and post-graduate medical education, and as an indispensable counterpoint to the one dimensional specialist that excessive specialisation tends to produce.

This model of academic organization will find some correspondence in the departmental organization of the different clinical areas, in medicine and surgery, which is indispensable in order to better use the human and material resources and for medical-surgical cooperation, in which Professor Celestino da Costa was one of the pioneers. It will also be a driving factor for teaching and research, which, along with a differentiated and qualified aid-providing function, are the mission of the University Hospital. It is important to mention that this concept in its broader sense as the Academic Medical Centre, involving ambulatory care units and other hospital units which we have carefully been fusing together, within a strategy of clinical teaching that takes advantage of the capacities for assistance set up in the “University City”, has been carried out in consonance with the view held by the current Chairman of the Board of our hospital and which is echoed in the several different formal and informal meetings between the governing body of the Faculty, the Board of the hospital and representatives of the Ministry of Health.

Professor Celestino da Costa is one of the most illustrious figures in contemporary Portuguese medicine. He was a distinguished surgeon, whose work was admired for its elegance and sureness, and was a reference for generations of young surgeons who sought him out for their most complicated cases, he cultivated the surgical science which he strictly applied to operational indications and practice, and was a Pioneer of
cardiothoracic surgery in Portugal and in this institution, for the first time successfully carrying out complex operations to repair aneurismatic disease of the thoracic aorta and surgical treatment of complex cardiopathologies. In his service he carried out the difficult and complex portal hypertension surgery, and his works on splenetic circulation, with Ayres de Sousa, were of extreme importance, as well as his teaching on trauma, and, in particular, thorax lesions, which have been the “bible” for many of us throughout the years.

Professor Jaime Celestino da Costa was the unquestioned Master and performer of surgical modernity, of science and technique, who brought his scientific and cultural influence and his undeniable magnetism and personal charm to a great many disciples who influenced surgery in Portugal.

His personality and work need no further analysis and praise: others have done this better and more eloquently on many occasions. Allow me only to recall the harmonious confluence he achieved between medical science, humanist culture and art, which he continues to collect – his love for music, confessed in a fascinating article that it is always a pleasure to re-read – and revealed to the interested admirer on the shelves of his magnificent library, “in those that are around the piano” on which he has been a quality performer, far beyond the amateur pianist. Indeed, among the Voices that were his call to excellence, there is a special note for music, that faithful and trusted companion that consoles us and spurs us on in the toughest and most demanding moments of Art.

There is a hidden rationale in music, not just that tuning of the neurons, of emotions and of awareness that makes us gregarious and makes us live that feeling of belonging and communion with others. It is something else, that I could not understand and verbalise, but which I found described in that wonderful booklet entitled “The Lives of a Cell”, in which the author wrote: “We are only saved by music from being overwhelmed by nonsense”.

Professor Jaime Celestino da Costa embodies the true man of science and culture, like his Masters, Augusto Celestino da Costa and Reynaldo dos Santos, whose influence he acknowledged in texts which are compulsory landmarks in the history of culture of medicine in Portugal.
Some years ago, after a scientific debate in Cologne on the role of carotid endarterectomy in relation to the development of angioplasty with stents, I sought rest for my mind and comfort for my soul in Cologne’s impressive Gothic cathedral. Someone was practicing a Toccata by Bach on the organ, and, believe me, my dear Professor, I was thinking of you and of how you would also like to be there. In the music of Bach, in its transcendental appeal, which seemed to accompany the architectural rigour and the lightness of the gothic domes, I sought the challenged reason and the spiritual balance that are aroused by medical uncertainty.

I am not talking about his beloved equestrian art, to which he devoted talent and energy and practiced so well, with extreme excellence and elegance, and the beauty of which stands out in that “Fugue for Three Voices” in his book “A Concept of Medicine” which was published by his faculty. “Don’t forget to go to the show at the Riding School” he strongly recommended some years ago, on a professional visit to Lisbon. I confess that, albeit being more in touch with “mechanical things”, I was sensitive to the magic and charm of the show, and the memory of which allows me to better understand his description, when I read it again, on the training of the beautiful Lusitanian horses that he practised with elegance and firmness and which I am sure provided him with relief for other bitternesses of surgical training.

Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, an extremely brief memory of my own contacts with Professor Jaime Celestino da Costa.

That contact, which began as his student in Surgical Propedeutics and as a keen user of the service library, was continued as a young intern, where, almost clandestinely, under the pretext of “helping” a fellow student whom I later married, I learned to and got used to the demands of the post-operative intensive care for his heart operation patients, of which he was a pioneer in our institution.

I was discreet, as demanded by the occasion, but I learned a great deal!

I met him again in London, at the end of my training period, during which I worked with the team headed by Stuart Lennox. He was a wise and experienced man, and asked me if I knew him and had had contact with him before, given that I was getting ready to come back. He offered me the opportunity to take advantage of his participation in the
courses in Brompton for me to have personal contact, suggesting that I spoke of my work and my expectations, and I believe he asked him to spare me a few minutes. I invited him to visit St. Mary’s, which he kindly accepted, and I can see him, my dear Master and friend, coming out of the tube at Paddington station, where I was waiting for him, I now confess, nervous and worried about whether I would be up to the occasion. I always had the feeling that I had not impressed him as I should have done, but his courtesy and the attention with which he listened to me left me with some hopes.

So it was like this, through a personal recommendation, made honestly and openly, which one attempts to deserve through daily activity and which is much more demanding and full of responsibility for the person recommended than are open competitions, through which our medical careers are impoverished, that I joined the vast circle of his disciples and began to benefit from his intellectual, scientific and ethical influence, which has been so important in my clinical and academic life.

I recall the discreet, interested supervision and the availability with which he received some of my patients in the Intensive Care Unit, unfortunately de-activated almost twenty years ago and turned into a material store, in an operating block that we hope will soon have a post-operational recovery unit. And it was here, in this space that is finally receiving his name, where as a student I looked for the modern books on surgical physiopathology with his permission, that, later on in difficult moments, I found, like so many others, support and encouragement, learning with him to give special attention to the essential and to forget the accessories, benefiting from his advice, that sure and firm exercise that is the mark of the true Master.

Curious circumstances made me return to a line of scientific research of which he was a pioneer and which aroused less attention from the professional Vascular Surgery community. I am referring to his remarkable work on the “Arterial Wall” which was his PhD thesis and on which he granted a unitary and structured view of the artery walls as an organ, of which the physiological response to noxas could be understood. It was an innovating work, which did not receive the divulging it deserved because it was written in Portuguese, because arterial repair surgery was far removed from the illness and because at the time there were no methods of diagnosis that could be applied live and without any consequences. Only in the nineties did this become possible with modern vascular imagiology. In our working group Mendes Pedro developed the application of
the technology of high definition ecography and the associated computerisation, which allowed an objective, non-invasive and reproducible view of the arterial wall. The images obtained are fascinating and the research carried out had international repercussion and acceptance, and this allowed us to re-encounter his work from the nineteen forties.

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

Someone wrote that “the past is another country”, and it is necessary to be a skilled and knowledgeable pilot to make that journey. Professor Jaime Celestino da Costa has devoted the enthusiasm of his *glorious youth* to teaching us the history of Portuguese medicine, of its most productive and fascinating period, and that is also a debt of gratitude that we all owe him. His writings about the generation of 1911, about Wolwhill, and the historical analysis of his impact on the development of scientific medicine in Portugal are compulsory elements for reflection and study.

I am fully aware of the fact that history does not repeat itself, as it is not re-written, but its lessons are essential for planning the future.

In the homage we are paying him today we have tried to also involve the students, because one of our aims, besides acknowledging and celebrating his scientific, medical and surgical works, his rich human, cultural and artistic dimension, is that of pointing out paths for the new generations, granting them references, setting out the path to follow with examples that are the true supports of this medical school, the founding of its institutional culture of the scientific and deeply human medicine that he always defended and of the educated, knowledgeable, responsible and interested doctor that it is our mission to continue and transmit and which is also his “Concept of Medicine”.

Illustrious friend and Master, the function I am now carrying out – and when I think about this I am always reminded of the story told by Malraux about the conversation between two gats on the rooftops of Paris, in which one asks the other, “What are you doing here?” and the other one replies, “I play the cat at Mallarmé’s house”, that strange and opaque poet, the author of “L’après-midi d’un faune” which inspired Debussy – that function, as I was saying, allows me the privilege of communicating on this occasion, to you, to his disciples and family and admirers, who are all of us here present, that the
Faculty of Medicine, through a unanimous decision by its Directive and Scientific Councils, have decided to award you, Professor Jaime Celestino da Costa, the Medal of Honour of our Faculty, our highest distinction, to be given to you with all solemnity at the opening of the academic year in November.

Professor, thank you for everything you have taught us and will continue to teach through your example as a doctor, surgeon, illustrious professor, respected and admired by your students and disciples, for your tireless scientific work, your open mindedness, always keen for new knowledge, about culture and science, through your intelligence and rigorous and implacable lucidness with which even today you are able to dismantle our most solidly-grounded arguments.

Our challenge is to be able to deserve your example, to grant it living continuity for new generations, thus honouring your remarkable contribution to Portuguese medicine and culture.

*Speech given in June 2005 at the ceremony to grant the name of Professor Jaime Celestino da Costa to the amphitheatre of the Academic Area of Surgery at the FMUL.*