



INDIAN SOCIETY OF HYPERTENSION



CURRENT MEDICAL CONCEPTS



# A Tribute

## Prof. Ramon Abarquez Jr

Rafael R. Castillo<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Internal Medicine, Manila Doctors Hospital, Philippines, <sup>2</sup>Section of Cardiovascular Medicine, Adventist University of the Philippines College of Medicine, Silang, Philippines

When Prof. Ramon F. Abarquez, Jr., MD, EFACC, FPCC, FPCP, CSPSH founded the Philippine Society of Hypertension (PSH) 26 years ago in 1993, he asked during the inaugural meeting of the Society: “Why do millions have to die due to hypertension-related complications when something could be done.”

For the next 25 years, he nurtured the PSH to become one of the robust multispecialty societies involved in various hypertension researches and advocacies, inspiring likewise the establishment of a highly committed alliance of more than 20 medical organizations and governmental and non-governmental organizations collaborating in all advocacy programs on hypertension control in the country.

In 1996, he led the organization of the Asia Pacific Rim Hypertension Summit, inviting international experts on hypertension for a highly interactive discussion on how we could stem the tide of hypertension in the region. During the summit, the Asian PSH was born with Prof. Abarquez as one of its founding members and officers.

Last year on January 10, 2018, he passed away at the age of 89 leaving a sterling legacy as one of the icons in Cardiovascular Medicine, specifically in the field of hypertension, in the country and the Asia Pacific region.

He will always be remembered for his generosity in sharing his expertise, innovativeness in research, healthy lifestyle advocacy, and passion for academic and professional excellence.

### Emeritus Professor

Even after his official retirement from the University of the Philippines College of Medicine (UPCM), Prof. Abarquez continued to give lectures to medical students and attend medical conferences on his wheelchair. He was given the title of emeritus professor by the college, but he remained active in the academe, in research activities and clinical practice. He was prolific in writing scholarly articles published in medical journals

### Address for correspondence:

Rafael R. Castillo, Department of Internal Medicine, Manila Doctors Hospital, United Nations Avenue, Manila, Philippines.  
Tel.: 63-2-892-0723/+(63)917-886-8409. E-mail: rafael.castillo@fame.ph

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and in health and lifestyle (H&L) magazine, for which he wrote a regular column that his peers and students always looked forward to read for its rich information and insights.

With a sterling record as a UPCM faculty and scientist, Prof. Abarquez was elected academician of the Philippine National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) in 1993. Academicians are distinguished members of the NAST – the highest recognition for Filipino scientists. They also serve as the highest scientific advisory body in the country. From their ranks are nominated, the National Scientists Dr. Abarquez was nominated for this distinguished title.

Peers recognize Dr. Abarquez’s contribution to Philippine medicine. He provided clinical practice-changing insights with his pioneering researches, more than 200 of which have been published in international peer-reviewed journals. Of these, 27 papers received awards and recognition here and abroad.

“The best legacy a doctor can give is pioneering research outputs and advocacies perceived to be the first at that point in time,” Prof. Abarquez wrote in one of his commentaries in H&L. He chaired the medical advisory board of the magazine and was one of its most diligent columnists who submitted articles way ahead of the deadline. Even when he was already confined in the hospital, he maintained his column and would patiently dictate his piece to his nurse.

### Innovative Researches

As early as 1960, Prof. Abarquez’s research works were already groundbreaking. His innovative research made possible the stress test or exercise electrocardiogram (ECG) test. As a cardiology research fellow then, he was funded and tasked by the New York Heart Association to develop a technique to record the ECG of a patient during exercise, which was not possible at that time. Despite initial setbacks, he persevered, and after more than a year of experimentation, he was able to design successfully the prototype of the stress test electrodes currently used worldwide.



Prof. Abarquez's prototype produced a successful recording of the ECG during exercise. As senior author of this pioneering study, he presented an innovative research in a scientific meeting of the American Heart Association Convention in Florida, for which he was recognized by prominent international authorities in cardiovascular medicine.

It is no exaggeration to say that hundreds of millions of patients with ischemic heart disease from 1960 to the present have benefited and continue to benefit from Prof. Abarquez's innovative research early in his career. For this, he was given the Cultural Heritage Award by the Philippine government in 1963, after returning from training abroad.

### Redefining Hypertension

In 1979, he pushed for the treatment of hypertension at a level of 140/90 mmHg, then considered by international expert bodies to be still normal. High blood pressure then was defined as 160/100 mmHg or higher, but he and his research team at the University of the Philippines, Philippine General Hospital, published a study showing that there were already abnormal changes in the heart and arteries of individuals with as low a level as 140/90 mmHg.

Prof. Abarquez also published the first paper showing that a certain class of drug, the calcium channel blockers, which was then being used only to control high blood pressure, could also be used for patients with myocardial ischemia.

His other notable researches and contribution to the science of medicine include:

- a. Observational data suggesting that the addition of digitalis to antihypertensive agents can prevent left ventricular dysfunction in hypertensive patients, and improve survival in post-myocardial infarction cases;
- b. The proposal to the World Health Organization Western Pacific Task Force to include the use of coconut products along with olive oil and fish oil in reducing coronary artery disease based on association studies;

- c. Low total body potassium exists among diabetics and can be reflected in the ECG;
- d. Primordial prevention of hypertension is an important proactive approach rather than mere reactive management;
- e. The survival of Filipino patients following myocardial infarction is one of the lowest in the world.

### Healthy Lifestyle Advocacy

Although Prof. Abarquez advocated adequate drug treatment for various heart ailments, he always emphasized the importance of healthy lifestyle changes, which, to him, should be the foundation of treatment of all cardiovascular diseases. This was at a time when many considered therapeutic lifestyle changes as difficult to sustain on the long term.

To promote this, he coined the catchy slogan "SEX-HDL," which stood for smoking cessation, exercise, control of high blood pressure, diabetes, and lipid abnormalities by means of a healthy diet and a physically active lifestyle. He emphasized that SEX-HDL should be a family affair, meaning parents should set the example to motivate their children to lead a healthy lifestyle.

Prof. Abarquez was past president of the Philippine Heart Association/Philippine College of Cardiology, Philippine College of Physicians and PSH.

The Philippine and Asia Pacific medical community will certainly miss Prof. Abarquez. He cast a giant shadow on the practice of medicine in the region. Although he is now gone, the legacy of his teachings, philosophy, and ideals will remain in the hearts and minds of everyone whose lives he has touched.

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