

Dr. Hugo Behm Rosas: a pioneer in social medicine (Santiago 1913 - San José 2011)

Dr. Hugo Behm Rosas: un pionero de la medicina social
(Santiago 1913 - San José 2011)

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After receiving his medical degree in 1936, Dr. Behm dedicated the next 17 years to the study of tuberculosis. In Santiago, as a member of the medical group at El Peral Hospital, he authored many clinical and epidemiological works which were later continued in an experimental program for the control of tuberculosis in Quinta Normal Commune.

From 1953 onward he worked in the field of biostatistics, continuing his training through specialized courses at the School of Health in Chile and at Johns Hopkins University – where other figures in Chilean public health were also trained – and later at Columbia University in New York.

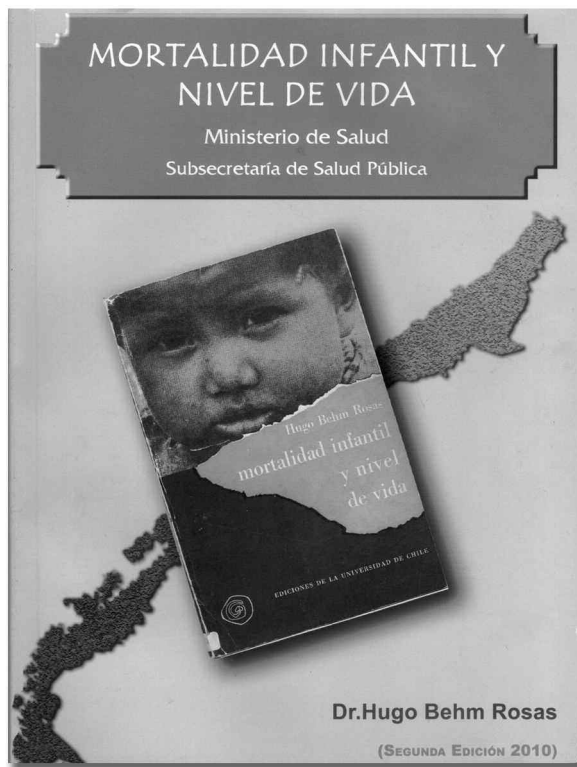
In 1953 he was also named president of the Chilean Society for Respiratory Diseases. He held this office until 1954, at the same time working as professor of Biostatistics in the School of Medicine at the Universidad de Chile. He was then named Director of the School of Health. It was during this time that noted epidemiologist Milton Terris commented that the three best schools of public health in the world were the School of Health of the Universidad de Chile, directed by Professor Behm, Johns Hopkins and the London School of Public Health.

In addition to his exceptional qualities as organizer and director of the School of Health, he possessed a sharp mind, great clarity of thought and an unusual ability to teach the



seemingly difficult and arid discipline of biostatistics in a simple way.

By the end of the 1940s, he was considered one of the most important figures in Chilean public health; Salvador Allende, senator of the Republic at the time, asked for his assistance in drafting the law that created the National Health



Service in 1952. This project was one of the best of its kind, aimed at providing better health services to the entire population and a model in Latin America, comparable only to the systems existing at the time in Great Britain, Sweden and the Soviet countries. It was later used as a model to establish the Health System in Cuba. Unfortunately, this project was completely dismembered by the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

In the beginning of the 1960s, he co-founded the journal *Cuadernos Médico Sociales* of the College of Medicine of Chile, which sought to become an outlet for expressing the aspirations for health in a developing society. He participated actively in the journal while living in Chile.

In 1962, he published the book *Mortalidad infantil y nivel de vida* with the support of the Universidad de Chile. This book presented, for the first time in Chile, a statistical analysis with which to discuss the reach of medical and social actions in the control of infant mortality, in a population whose standard of living at the time was very low. It is widely acknowledged as one of the most important works of research of the twentieth century in Chile.

This same year he became a consultant in his specialty of biostatistics for the World Health

Organization and for the Latin American Demographic Centre (CELADE, from the Spanish Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía) of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). He served as advisor to many countries in Latin America, where he became a central figure in the field of public health.

In 1973 he was taken prisoner by the military dictatorship. In September 1975, he was removed from the concentration camp in Ritoque and taken out of the country, thanks to actions taken by American Public Health Association (APHA) for the liberation of six detained and imprisoned health professionals. It is important to mention that Dr. Behm was the vice president of the APHA for Latin America, a position to which he was later re-elected.

Chilean actor Oscar Castro, who was a prison mate of Dr. Behm's, wrote these lines upon hearing of his death:

This doctor, who was concerned about public health, left a mark upon all the prisoners; his simplicity made him an unforgettable character. I talked with him several times about his passion, a medical specialty that until then I thought was only for bureaucrats. He talked to me about how important it was for the people to grow up healthy, and for all people to enjoy, in good health, the possibilities life offers.

During my last trip to Chile, I met some of my former prison mates and we recalled each part of the Ritoque concentration camp with those who lived there. We had already forgotten many things, but we remembered that sometimes we visited the doctor not to consult him about a health problem, but to share a cup of tea, that in his room, was lucky enough to be accompanied by a slice of cake.

Now, advised of his passing, my only reflection is how such a large spirit could fit inside a body like the one of my friend, doctor Behm. I say farewell to him with the serenity of knowing that another good friend from unfortunate times has left us.

During his exile in Costa Rica, he carried out a study as consultant for CELADE on social inequalities in mortality in Central America, Panama and Latin America considered pioneering worldwide. The results of the study demonstrated

scientifically that in country after country, maternal education is an important factor for the health and survival of young children and, specifically, for decreasing infant mortality.

In a letter written to Dr. Behm's daughter Ingrid, Luis Bernardo Villalobos Solano, from the Public School of Health of the Universidad de Costa Rica, recalls this contribution:

Yesterday when I heard the news that Don Hugo had passed away, an image of the pride I felt upon meeting your father crossed my mind; I was already an admirer of his because he had influenced my training as a health professional at the beginning of 1980s, in the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellin, Colombia. My professor in that university, Alberto Vasco Uribe, whom I also remember fondly, recommended an article to us published by Dr. Behm in Revista Centroamericana de Ciencias de la Salud in January 1979, entitled: Economic and Social Determinants of Mortality in Latin America (Determinantes Económicos y Sociales de la Mortalidad en América Latina).

I frequently recall to my undergraduate and graduate students this excellent publication that was so ahead of its time. Before the Commission chaired by Sir Michael Marmot presented to the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2008 the report about Social Determinants of Health, Don Hugo had already used the concept of determinants. He was 32 years ahead of his time, although I think much more than that, because when ideas are expressed with such clarity in a written report, it is because they have been previously studied – as in this case – and are based in several decades of experience.

I would like to remind all those who walk the paths of Public Health, promoting a fairer and more equitable society, of what Don Hugo tells us at the beginning of his article (I quote):

"Mortality in Latin America has experienced dramatic decreases in recent decades, although there continue to be excessive differences in comparison with the levels reached in more developed regions. The relationship between death and socioeconomic conditions is well known, although the action mechanisms and the

relative importance of the different intervening factors are still unclear. Thus, it is convenient to analyze the existing knowledge regarding the characteristics and origins of the socioeconomic differentials in mortality in Latin America in order to better explain the present situation and its perspectives."

At the end of that article, Don Hugo uses Antonovsky's explanation of the stratification of the proportion of deaths in the Titanic according to the class in which people were travelling, with those travelling in "third class" being the most affected, to remark upon the situation in Latin America. I think that a reading of this and other works, considered within today's context, will continue to contribute to what Don Hugo expresses in this fragment. I quote again:

"Every year the bodies of almost a million children under five years are thrown overboard, with nothing indicating that they should have had to die; most of these children come from the "third class." It is our responsibility to demonstrate to the different levels of political decision-makers and to the people and populations themselves, objectively and with the power that science confers, the magnitude of this monstrous genocide and the profound causes giving rise to it."

This division remains relevant in the present day but with another connotation, because fewer children die before five years of age, but after that age and until they reach old age, if they survive adolescence and youth, they die slowly due to the problems noted by Don Hugo.

The annual International Health Central American Institute (IHCAI) award is named after this Latin American humanist, statistician and epidemiologist who dedicated his life to fighting infant mortality.

The esteemed Dr. Hugo Behm Rosas passed away on Thursday, April 28, 2011 at 3:50 AM in San Jose de Costa Rica.

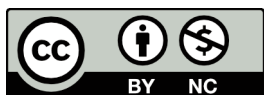
The work of Professor Behm is recognized worldwide, serving as a source of inspiration in the world of public health and social medicine for many generations of doctors.

Among the numerous works published on this subject, we highlight:

- Behm H, Rosero L. La mortalidad en los primeros años de vida en América Latina. San José: CELADE; 1977.
- Behm H. Determinantes económicos y sociales de la mortalidad infantil en América Latina. Revista Centroamericana de Ciencias de la Salud. 1979;(12):69-102.
- Behm Rosas H. La mortalidad en la niñez en Centroamérica, Panamá y Belice 1970-1985. San José: CELADE; 1988.
- Behm H. Las desigualdades sociales ante la muerte en América Latina. San José: CELADE, Organización Holandesa para la Cooperación Internacional en Educación Superior; 1992.

CITATION

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