

Elias Phocas MD (1930-2012)



We recently said our last goodbye to Elias Phocas, a distinguished gastroenterologist, teacher and friend. He faithfully and selflessly served Hellenic Gastroenterology for decades in a wide array of positions, including the Presidency of the Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology, and Presidency of the Panhellenic Gastroenterology Congress.

The manner in which Elias practiced gastroenterology sets an inspiring example for us all, especially for our younger colleagues.

The foundations of his great contribution to Hellenic Gastroenterology and to his patients lay in his excellent training, his natural kindness, and his unflinching compassion towards his fellow human beings.

Elias began his studies in Athens, and then spent five years at Saint Antoine Hospital in Paris studying under the great teachers Caroli and Gutmann. It always impressed me how important he felt his studies were under Gutmann, who was actually a surgeon and not a gastroenterologist. He was a proponent of holistic gastroenterology, where all specializations dealing with the digestive system participated actively in the united Gastroenterology Society. Elias had another strong tie to Gutmann – their common love of music and the arts.

I came to know Elias's natural kindness from our first acquaintance in 1979, at the beginning of my medical career. As a young doctor, I registered to participate in the National Gastroenterology Congress in which, Elias, already renowned at the time, was the organizer. I met him at the Laiko Hospital where he was a University Professor. I was impressed that he accepted me immediately as a colleague, a respected equal, without my having to "prove myself" first, as was common practice. He showed me that when trust is given to people, it makes them strive to live up to expectations, which in fact is an incentive for improvement. This openness illustrates what a great person he was.

The main recipients and beneficiaries of this kindness were his patients, who saw him as a father figure, one who often took the initiative of follow-up calls to them. He had a love for his patients and genuine interest in their wellbeing, and this was an incentive for his continuous study and continuous discussions with colleagues with special interests in the broad field of the Specialty. Most well-established gastroenterologists in Athens remember the polite evening phone calls Elias

would make to them in order to exchange ideas about patients. These informal "medical rounds" played an educational role for younger doctors who in turn also adopted this method of informal discussion with colleagues.

His word was always genial, he never allowed himself to succumb to "time pressure", nor to errors made of haste. Today, we feel pressured by time constraints and all too often attribute this pressure to our procedures of an invasive nature. Yet we should remember that Elias was one of the first invasive-interventional Gastroenterologists in the Country, as very early on he started performing diagnostic laparoscopy.

Elias left us examples to follow in other important areas, and these are particularly important for Greece during these times of crisis. We will always remember the homeliness of the monthly meetings of the Society of Gastroenterology at the Laiko Hospital which were not only of great educational value, but were also characterized by friendship and camaraderie amongst the members. What is less well known but is important, is that Elias always strictly observed the separation of medicine from the pharmaceutical industry, refusing payment or other benefits for attending conferences and modeling decency and ethics for all of us. Elias and his family lived modestly, choosing not to acquire wealth through his medical practice.

He always had a deep love for his homeland of Cephalonia, where, in a typical spotless earthquake-resistant house, he spent his summer vacations, enjoying the unequalled majestic beauty of Sami.

The prototype of a doctor for Elias was the one he described in his memorable speech at the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Hellenic Society of Gastroenterology in 1992. He talked about the morality and honorability of the founders of the Society and in doing so he referred to the writings of Nicholaos Louros, "How can the accomplished doctor be considered completely whole if he is not able to love art, music, theater..." For him music was the healing medicine that relaxed him, calmed him, and gave him strength. He was a doctor in the Hippocratic tradition, with the human qualities which Hippocrates describes in his "Peri Iitrou" text.

In recent years, Elias was very happy as he was surrounded not only by his life partner Iphigenia, but also by his two daughters and lovely grandchildren. His passing was sudden but peaceful and he has now returned to his birthplace, Cephalonia.

His work in our profession and the wonderful person he was will always be an example for us to follow.

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