Cardiology in the Young

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Francis Fontan: an appreciation

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Letter to the Editor

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Figure 1. Francis Fontan photographed in the garden of the author in the early 1990s.

It has been a bad few months for the pioneers of paediatric cardiac surgery. Not so long ago, Jim Wilkinson provided an appreciation of the contributions of David Hamilton.[1] As he explained, it was David who offered me the first opportunity to become involved with studies of the conduction tissues in the congenitally malformed heart. More recently, Joe Dearani provided a wonderful encomium describing the innovations made by Gordon Danielson, and painted an excellent picture of the life of a true gentleman.[2] Now we have lost Francis Fontan (Fig 1).[3] Francis shared all of the attributes of the previously mentioned pioneers. He was the true all-round cardiac surgeon, having made contributions in all aspects of cardiothoracic and vascular surgery. Others better qualified than I will be commenting on these achievements. For me, he was the epitome of a mentor. I was fortunate to be taken "in hand" by him when I was first invited to one of the symposiums that blossomed in the early 1970s, a period of great innovation and expansion in the field of paediatric cardiac surgery. Not only did he guide me in the field of academic cardiac surgery, he befriended me and my wife. On numerous occasions, we were fortunate to be the recipients of his generous hospitality. As might be expected, a Professor of Cardiac Surgery in Bordeaux had numerous connections with the winegrowers of the region. It was because of Francis that I was introduced to some of the more stellar names of the region, such as Mouton Rothschild and Palmer. I was subsequently privileged to drink many splendid bottles in his company, and to share with him and his wife, Maryse, our own love of the golf course. From my stance, he was everything that an academic was supposed to be. We will remember his remarkable vision not only because of the procedure named after him, but also for the ongoing growth of another of his innovations, the European Association of CardioThoracic Surgery. Together with Francis, and Lucio Parenzan, another giant now no longer with us, we wrote the appreciation of the real giant in the field, John Kirklin, who had served as the ideal mentor for all of us.[4] As we commented in that appreciation, we shall not see his like again. The same can be said of Francis Fontan. We will miss him, but his name will long be remembered.

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