THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF SERVICE OF PROFESSOR DR. ANIS BARAKA

- IN TRIBUTE -

PROFILE OF ANIS BARAKA*

Professor and Chairman, Department of Anesthesiology, American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Humble beginnings

Anis Baraka was born in Fayoum in Egypt in 1930. “Fayoum is just a village. My parents did not have a medical background. I was the only person in the village who went to the university at that time”. He went to Cairo to study medicine, graduating in 1953. It was during his time as an intern that he became attracted to anaesthesia, and subsequently entered the residency programme in Cairo University Hospital. In 1961 his thesis was accepted and he was awarded the research degree of MD. He joined the Cairo University Department following this.

Research in Europe

His MD thesis was on the subject of muscle relaxants, and Professor Cecil Gray, whilst visiting the Cairo University, reviewed the manuscript. “As you know, Cecil Gray is considered the Father of Relaxants in the United Kingdom, and he invited me to join his Department in Liverpool as a Research Fellow. I accepted the offer and traveled to the UK in 1963. It was in Liverpool that I investigated the effect of PCO₂ on muscle relaxants, and also compared the block obtained from different drugs”. These were the first of a series of studies on muscle relaxants that he published in the British Journal of Anaesthesia.

Arrival in Beirut

It was whilst he was in Liverpool that the offer came to go to Beirut. “Dr. Bernard Brandstater, Chairman of Anesthesiology at the American University of Beirut, listened to a presentation of my research and invited me to join the Faculty at the American University of Beirut”. Before leaving the UK he undertook further training at the National heart Hospital London, and began his long association with the American University in 1965. His bibliography testifies to a formidable research output at this time. He was appointed Assistant Professor in 1966, and ten years later Professor and Chairman of the Department, a post has now held for almost 30 years.

Civil war

During the 1960s, Beirut had acquired a reputation as a lively cultural and financial center where east and west mingled freely together. In the 1970s, stability collapsed, and warring factions
destroyed the city. There was widespread breakdown of basic services, and there were significant personal risks to those who remained in the city. In Professor Baraka’s slide collection are pictures of some of the horrific injuries of victims caught in the strife that continued for 15 years.

“I was in Beirut throughout the war. As a matter of fact I was the only Chairman who stayed because I felt my duty was to provide a service for the casualties. I found it interesting that even without supplies of oxygen and nitrous oxide we could still provide effective general anaesthesia and get good results”.

In recognition of his achievements, and particularly his contribution during the war, he received a number of honours, not only from the Lebanon, but internationally. In 1990, the Royal College of Anaesthetists awarded him an honorary Fellowship, and he was appointed to the International Commission of the Ralph Waters Prize. He is a Vice-President of the World Federation of the Societies of Anaesthesiology, and represents them at the Regional Commission of the United Nations. Despite all the plaudits, he still anaesthetizes regularly. “I only go to my office when there is an official meeting. My present location is in the operating room where I function not only as Chairman of Anesthesiology, but also as Co-ordinator of the Operating Room”.

**Academic activity**

His Department teaches both undergraduates and postgraduates on a residency programme, with a full range of discussions, reviews, lectures and presentations. “I allow our Faculty to attend at least one international conference each year, such as the annual meetings of the ESA or the
ASA”. His own lectures are full of grainy black and white images interspersed with modern colour prints detailing an astonishing caseload of difficult clinical problems collected from almost half a century of clinical practice.

His curriculum vitae lists 20 pages of publications spanning 40 years, many in the specialty’s core journals. “I consider that academic anesthesia can be considered so only if there is continuing publication. I have 15 Faculty who need publications for promotion, and I always help them achieve their goals”.

Retirement

He officially retired ten years ago, at the age of 65. “The University keep extending my appointment, but only one year at a time. Now I am 75, but I do not feel old enough to retire. The best relaxation I have is my work, and I enjoy participating in national and international meetings when I can socialize with my colleagues”. For those about to start a new career in medicine he gives this advice; “Never do your job for money, prestige or position. Medicine has a humanitarian message, you do it with love”.

The Department of Anesthesia of the American University, Beirut