

Professor Bernard François GRIBOMONT (1932 -2023)

Professor Gribomont died on October 12, 2023, at the age of 91.

He graduated in 1960 as a Doctor in Medicine from the Catholic University of Louvain (UCLouvain, Belgium) and trained as an anesthesiologist in Leuven with Professors Jan Van de Walle and Yolande Kestens-Servaye. At the end of 1962 he left for Lovanium (Leopoldville, now Kinshasa) where he improved his skills as a self-taught and inventive practitioner: he invented there his Mapleson G pediatric low dead-space ventilation system. He returned to Belgium in 1967 to join his university anesthesiology team. In 1976-77 he managed their department move to the newly build Saint-Luc Hospital in Brussels where he became responsible for clinical training as a member of a college with professors De Temmerman and Kestens-Servaye. He was appointed professor in 1977, and “Maître de Stages Coordinateur” in 1981 supervising anesthesia training in a network of ten teaching hospitals affiliated to the French-speaking UCLouvain. He became Head of Department in 1988 and retired in 1997.

Starting from almost nothing he developed an internationally recognized school of anesthesiology where under his leadership more than 200 well trained physician anesthesiologists graduated to practice in Belgium but also in Chile, Bolivia, Congo (now DRC), France and Italy. Up to date the department has trained about one-thousand anesthesiologists including 200 from low-income countries who came to study thanks to Belgian scholarships. Several of those fellows started anesthesia schools in their home countries, mainly in West and Central Africa, perpetuating professor Gribomont’s teaching methods and philosophy.

His teaching emphasized continuous “beat to beat” attention to the patient, rigorous execution of clinical procedures and clinical mentoring: anesthesia teachers taught daily in the operating theatres. The quality of his numerous fellows contributed to the international reputation of the so-called “Belgian School of Anesthesia”.

BF Gribomont was a precursor. He was one of the founding fathers of the European Society of Anesthesiologists, one of the three international European anesthesiology societies, that amalgamated in 2005 to the European Society of Anaesthesiology (ESA, now ESAIC). Ahead of his time, he equipped his brand-new hospital with a fully monitored recovery room, he popularized low dose peridural analgesia in maternity wards, he extended anesthesia activities to a large number of outposts outside the operating theater. He invented and produced a high-precision neuro-muscular stimulator to perform local nerve blocks and monitor patients’ response to muscle relaxants, which improved their safety during their postoperative recovery.

His obsession with safety made him one of the driving forces behind the negotiations between the Belgian Society of Anesthesia and Resuscitation and the Belgian Professional Association of our discipline, leading to the publication in December 1989 of the first “Belgian Standards and Recommendations for Patient Safety during Anesthesia”, soon known as “SAFETY FIRST”. This pioneering text in Europe dramatically changed anesthesia practice in Belgium, practically outlawing simultaneous anesthetics, generalizing the use of modern monitoring systems (including pulse-oximetry and capnography) and setting new organizational standards within hospitals and anesthesia departments. It was a clear tipping point because insurance companies soon refused to insure anesthesiologists who could not work under these conditions.

Professor Gribomont was a visionary. Despite the then severe shortage of anesthesiologists in Belgium and in his own department, he encouraged every resident to spend one year of training in an English-speaking country. His insistence paid off: it proved a major asset to introduce new techniques, to develop international collaborations, to foster scientific projects, to publish in high-impact journals, and to sustain decades of spectacular advances in adult and pediatric surgery.

We feel deeply grateful for his teaching, training and humane mentoring during his long career.



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doi.org/10.56126/74.4.33