Fernando Ortiz Monasterio, or “el Maestro” as so many knew him, was born on July 23, 1923, in Mexico City, Mexico, into a modest family with 9 siblings. He developed an early interest in medicine and after graduating high school began his medical studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. After graduation he began his general surgical training at the Hospital General de Mexico Gea Gonzalez from 1946 to 1952.

During this time he was heavily influenced by Alfonso Serrano, a young plastic surgeon trained in the United States, whom he assisted in several reconstructive procedures. Having found his true calling, Dr Monasterio was accepted into the plastic surgery training program at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. From 1952 to 1954, under the mentorship of Truman Blocker Jr, MD, Dr Monasterio identified his main interest in pediatric and congenital facial plastic surgery. On graduation, he returned to Hospital General de Mexico Gea Gonzalez, where in 1957 he instituted a formal plastic surgery training program, the first formal program in plastic surgical training in Mexico.

In 1959, Dr Monasterio developed the first multidisciplinary cleft team in Mexico and dedicated his practice solely to what he referred to as congenital “aesthetic reconstructive surgery.” Limited by the bony deformities in patients with Crouzon or Apert syndrome, Dr Monasterio then took on further training with Paul Tessier of France and in 1970 performed the first craniomaxillofacial surgery on a 15-year-old boy with Crouzon syndrome.

A dynamic and ever-evolving surgeon, Dr Monasterio constantly tried to improve his outcomes. Although in the early days of his career his main methods of reconstruction were Z-plasties and rotational flaps for soft-tissue and bone grafts for bony defects resulting in unsightly scars and inadequate augmentation or advancement, his treatment philosophy and objectives evolved over the years to include “restoration of the craniofacial skeleton, reconstruction with skin and soft tissue of like color and texture, generous use of tissue expanders, aesthetic unit reconstruction, scar location at limits of aesthetic subunits, and symmetric repositioning of key facial landmarks.”

Dr Monasterio made important contributions to facial plastic surgery. He wrote more than 200 articles on topics that range widely from nasal aesthetic rhinoplasty and rhytidoplasty to facial burns, craniofacial distraction, and, of course, his beloved topic of cleft lip and palate reconstruction. In addition, he wrote 7 books, including Rhinoplasty and the Aesthetic Surgery of the Facial Skeleton. He was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Hipólito Unanue medal from Peru and the John Friedrich Dieffenbach medal from Germany, and was inducted into the Masters of Plastic Surgery Hall of Fame by the New York Academy of Medicine, among others. He was appointed honorary professor at several universities and was the visiting professor at more than 45 major universities, far too many to list. A member of more than 60 professional organizations in plastic surgery, he served as the president of the American Association of Plastic Surgeons, the International Society of Craniofacial Surgery, and virtually all plastic surgery associations and organizations in Mexico.

The cleft and craniofacial team started by Dr Monasterio at the Hospital General de Mexico Gea Gonzalez is perhaps one of the busiest in the world, with more than 24,000 children treated. The importance of affordable surgical care for underprivileged populations in societies in which superstitions regarding facial deformities may lead to abandonment or isolation cannot be overstated. Since its institution, more than 495 patients with major craniofacial clefts and thousands of patients with cleft lip and palate from varied socioeconomic backgrounds have undergone surgical repair.

Dr Monasterio had been ill over the past few years but few could imagine that such an energetic and charismatic man would succumb to his illness on the afternoon of October 31, 2012. As a junior resident, I had the fortune and privilege of meeting and working with him during a visit to Mexico. In the
operating room, Dr Monasterio was not only a talented surgeon, but also a true gentleman and educator. He was an altruistic physician and an innovative facial plastic surgeon. With a vision far beyond demodé specialty turf battles, he was a role model for generations of surgeons trained or influenced by him. Dr Monasterio is survived by 8 children, 25 grandchildren, and 14 great-grandchildren. He will be remembered with esteem and admiration. His life and work are chronicled in the award-winning 2012 documentary, Beautiful Faces.4


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