

REMEMBERING İHSAN DOĞRAMACI

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Where it all began

In 1915 a baby boy was born in the dusty Ottoman town of Erbil in what is today Iraq into a prominent and forward-looking family. They owned vast tracts of land and countless villages, and the boy's farsighted father in the early 1920s sent a nephew to Texas A&M University in the United States to learn modern ways of agriculture. Thus it is not surprising that he sent his own son to the Preparatory School of the American University of Beirut. He wanted him to study law in order to manage the family possessions, but young İhsan preferred to study medicine in order to help those in need he saw around him. He began his studies in Baghdad where the University of Edinburgh had opened a school of medicine with professors brought from the United Kingdom. After three years he transferred to the University of Istanbul Faculty of Medicine and graduated in 1938. He then went to visit his uncle who was governor of Manisa, a province close to Izmir. This holiday became a turning point in his life when Professor Albert Eckstein and his wife Erna, both pediatricians, came to call on the governor during their tour of Turkey collecting data on child health and mortality for the Ministry of Health.

Professor Eckstein was one of many German academics fleeing the Nazi regime who were hired by Turkish institutions of higher education in the 1930s. He invited the newly-minted physician to study pediatrics with him at Numune Hospital in Ankara, and İhsan Doğramacı was certified in that specialty in 1940. He returned to Baghdad where his father was by now a senator in the Iraqi parliament representing the Erbil Turkmens and served as pediatrician in a government hospital until 1944. While in Baghdad he married his wife Ayser, lifelong partner in all his undertakings, and together they decided to settle in Turkey.

Improving medical education and health care

In 1947, after spending several years as a fellow in pediatrics first at Boston Children's Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital through a program of Harvard University, and then at Washington University in St Louis, the young couple arrived in Turkey. Here, while considering his next step, İhsan met with his mentor Eckstein and accepted his proposal to join him in the Department of Pediatrics of the University of Ankara. Advancing through the academic ranks to become professor in 1955, the idealistic physician had ample opportunity to observe the sorry state of child health even in the capital city. He decided to do something about it. Infant mortality was estimated at 233 per thousand in 1955, when İhsan Doğramacı established the Institute of Child Health in Hacettepe, an impoverished area of Ankara, and the Hacettepe Children's Hospital (later named for him) attached to the University of Ankara. By 1961 the Institute included Turkey's first university-level schools of nursing, nutrition and dietetics, physical therapy and rehabilitation, and medical technology. He then proceeded to establish the Hacettepe Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences in 1963, which was a second faculty of medicine within the University of Ankara, and a school of dentistry.

In 1967 the Hacettepe Faculty of Medicine and the other schools under the Institute of Child Health were chartered as a new university, Hacettepe University, today one of the leading institutions of higher education in Turkey. Prof. Doğramacı later played a principal role in establishing four new universities and two medical faculties in Turkey as well as serving as rector of Hacettepe University from 1967 until 1975. He used these institutions to introduce modern medical education, hospital administration and health care as he had observed them during his stay in the United States, and he brought colleagues from that country to help him. In 1950 the Ecksteins had returned to Germany, but after the premature

death of her husband, Erna came to assist in setting up the hospitals, and their son Herbert, by then a pediatric surgeon in London, also worked for a time at the Hacettepe Hospitals.

One of Dođramacı's most significant contributions to child and public health was to achieve a national immunization campaign organized in 1985. At his personal urging, the president of Turkey, prime minister, ministers of health, education and the interior, the general directors of religious affairs and the Turkish Radio and Television, and the governors of all 81 provinces came together to launch the campaign with the contributions of UNICEF, WHO and Rotary International. As a result of mobilizing the nation's school teachers and imams to give their support to health workers, 4.3 million children under the age of five were vaccinated for tuberculosis, DPT, polio and measles by the end of the year. Coverage before the campaign was 25%-35%. By the end of the campaign 92% of all children under five had been vaccinated. Another important achievement of the campaign was the establishment of procedures to maintain this coverage in subsequent years. New vaccinations were added to the schedule, and Turkey was certified polio-free by WHO in June 2002.¹ According to figures provided by the National Public Health Agency, 96% of children under five had been immunized against DPT and polio in 2009, and 97% against measles, mumps and rubella.²

Reforming higher education

İhsan Dođramacı worried about all aspects of child health, in particular education. In 1980 the Turkish government had invited Professor Dođramacı to advise on the drafting of a new law governing higher education in the country. His recommendations for restructuring Turkey's higher education system included establishing a Council of Higher Education, and he served as president of the Council for 12 years, until 1992. During that time he was instrumental in the establishment of another 11 universities in Turkey. In 1980 only 6.3% of the 20-24 year age group in Turkey entered higher education. (Fig. 1) Through the increase in number of universities and expansion of admissions of candidates for higher education,

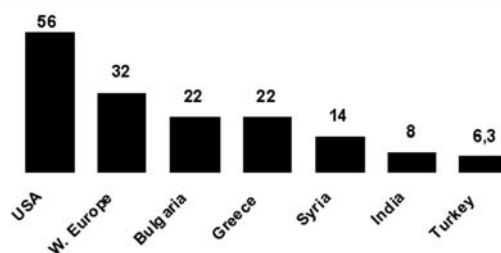


Fig. 1. Rate of Enrollment in Higher Education of the 20-24 Age Group

which continued after he stepped down from the post, by 2008 the proportion of the age group enrolled in tertiary education had risen to 38.2% (Fig. 2) despite an increase of 50% in the number of young people in that age group. As a result of his innovative use of holders of doctorates as teaching staff thus sidestepping certain bureaucratic bottlenecks, he was able to increase the numbers of teachers to accommodate the expanded enrollment.

Through his lobbying of the government, in 1982 the Turkish Constitution was amended to allow the establishment of universities by private non-profit foundations, and in 1984 he established the first private university in Turkey, Bilkent University. Today there are 51 of these "foundation universities."³ With the opening of Bilkent he ventured into primary and secondary education. The university includes a 1-12 music preparatory school which leads into the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts. Since 1993 it has operated a pre-K-12 school leading to the International Baccalaureate. Another school on campus, established by the İhsan Dođramacı Foundation, follows the Turkish K-12 curriculum with special emphasis on English

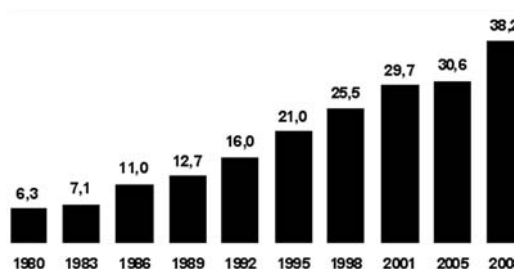


Fig. 2. Rate of Enrollment in Turkish Higher Education of the 20-24 Age Group

language. In an effort to upgrade educational opportunities in the less privileged eastern part of Turkey İhsan Dođramacı announced plans to open schools in Erzurum, Malatya, Urfa and Van. The Erzurum school accepted its first students in 2007 for an initial year of English language training before entry into high school. At that school 95% of the students are on full scholarship. The latest manifestation of Dođramacı's concern for education is the Bilkent International College Erbil, scheduled to open in September 2010 in his birthplace. It, too, will have a generous scholarship program as it begins with pre-K through first grade.

Innovations in funding

When starting the Hacettepe schools of higher learning, Dođramacı encountered problems with the lack of foreign currency in Turkey in the 1950s, which meant that work was held up by lack of imports. He used his family wealth to start construction companies and to import machinery for a furniture factory. He gave ownership of these companies, professionally managed, to philanthropic foundations he created, and their profits have funded his projects. Today there are nearly 50 companies owned by Bilkent University and providing an endowment to the various educational institutions.

Dođramacı was also successful in convincing the Turkish Government of the value of his project to create schools in eastern Turkey. A special law was passed to allow all income tax withheld from Bilkent salaries to be deposited in a special fund for use in financing the eastern schools.

Citizen of the world

Dođramacı, while devoted to the children and youth of Turkey, was a very international personage. He was first president and then executive director of the International Pediatric Association (IPA) for 25 years. He served two terms as chair of the Executive Board of UNICEF and long years as head of the Turkish delegation to the World Health Assembly, being the longest surviving signatory of the World Health Organization (WHO) Constitution. He held honorary doctorates from 30 universities including Glasgow, Helsinki, Nice, Rome and DeMontfort (UK) and membership in

eight national academies, among them the Académie Nationale de Médecine (France) and the Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina (German National Academy of Sciences) as well as honorary memberships in 23 national pediatric societies including those of Austria, Britain, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden. He was decorated by numerous heads of state and received the Christopherson Award of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Maurice Pate Award of UNICEF, the Léon Bernard Foundation Award of WHO. The Council of Europe awarded him its "Peace, Justice and Tolerance" Prize with Franz Cardinal König and Simon Wiesenthal in 1998.

His wisdom, tolerance and selflessness, his ability to understand novel ideas and apply them, his capacity to accomplish what he set out to do, his understanding of different perspectives and viewpoints, his generosity in lending a helping hand, his capacity for learning foreign languages, his respect and support for the arts and artists, his effectiveness in diplomacy, his magnanimity and modesty and his courage in visiting areas of conflict (such as Bosnia and Afghanistan) on behalf of children were extraordinary.

His genuine love for human beings shone through his contacts with them. All new visitors were greeted by him with details of their careers and accomplishments, which he had carefully investigated in preparation for their meeting. He was pragmatic, claiming as his motto that "Perfection is the enemy of good" and yet he planned seating in great detail in order to honor all rather than a single guest of honor.

He devoted his entire life, energy and creativity and his whole family fortune to the sake of underprivileged children in Turkey and the causes of child health and higher education of the world, predominantly in Canada, Brazil and Africa (Nigeria and Cameroon). He lived most of his adult life in Turkey, but he was truly a model citizen of the world. While Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan said: "Professor Dođramacı, you are indeed a model citizen of the world such as the United Nations would wish to find in every country."

Where it came to a close

İhsan Doğramacı died of cancer on February 25, 2010, at Hacettepe Hospital in Ankara where he been under care since early November. He was buried on the grounds of the mosque which he built to honor his father, near the Bilkent University campus. He is survived by his wife, three children, six grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren, and thousands of people who have enjoyed health care and educational opportunities thanks to his life work.

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