Profiles in Cardiology

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Dennis V. Cokkinos

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Dennis Cokkinos (Fig. 1) was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, on November 18, 1938, where his father, a high-ranking cavalry officer in the Greek army, was assigned at the time. Dennis proudly says that although he was born in Northern Greece, his parents registered the newborn son in Athens and thus he is a full-fledged Athenian! Who said that the wars between the Greek states are over?

Dennis's primary and secondary education was completed at the "Athens College," a very reputable private institution. After graduation in 1957, in selecting a professional career, Dennis was not influenced by his father, then a General in the Greek army. However, his mother's brother, Dr. Gardikas, a physician who later became a distinguished professor of internal medicine at the University of Athens, had more influence and encouraged young Dennis to pursue a medical career.

After successful entrance exams in 1957, Dennis enrolled in the Medical School of the University of Athens and graduated *summa cum laude* in 1963. After graduation, from 1965 to 1967, he had one year of internship and two years of internal medicine residency at Evangelismos Hospital in Athens. This period also coincided with his service to the Greek army as second lieutenant.

In 1966, Dennis married Vana Christodoulou, also a physician, who later specialized in laboratory-hematology. In spite of the couple's busy professional lives, they managed to raise three bright sons, all of whom followed in their parents' footsteps, one becoming a cardiologist, another a radiologist, and the youngest pursuing a career in internal medicine. Vana comes from a long line of physicians (grandfather, father, and sister). When you sit at the dinner table with the Cokkinos family and relatives, you have the distinct feeling that you are participating in a multispecialty symposium. However, the

conversation very often is centered on the arts, including painting, theater, and music. Vana is an accomplished essayist and novelist. Dennis writes a poem or two during his limited spare time.

Dennis reaffirmed his desire to become a cardiologist after a short cardiology course at the British Heart Institute in London in June 1967. From then on, cardiology became a calling and a commitment that has lasted throughout his professional career.

The newly wedded couple came to Houston, Texas, for additional postgraduate training where Dennis took an additional year of internal medicine (1967–1968) at Baylor University, and subsequently two years of cardiology fellowship at St. Luke's Hospital and Texas Heart Institute from 1968 to 1970. He is a diplomat of the American Boards of Internal Medicine and Cardiovascular Medicine.

Dennis's affiliation with the Texas Heart Institute has remained strong over the years with extended visits to the Institute as a Special Scholar in 1981, 1982, and 1983, and short annual visits since then. During his training at St. Luke's Hospital, he began a special friendship with his mentor, Robert Leachman, which lasted until Leachman's untimely death.

Returning to Greece, Dennis served as attending physician and cardiology registrar in three hospitals, namely, King Paul Hospital, Corinth State Hospital, and Evangelismos Medical Center in Athens. However, the position that gave him the chance to demonstrate his organizational skills and unquestionable leadership was his appointment in 1978 as Chief of Cardiology at Tzanio Hospital in Piraeus, Greece, where he remained until 1993. Before 1978, this hospital had had no training program in cardiology, and by 1993 it was ranked among the best three in Greece. While still at Tzanio Hospital, Dennis was elected Associate Professor of Cardiology at the University of Athens in 1990 and was promoted to full professor in 1998.

A new challenge arose when he was asked to get involved in the planning of the Onassis Cardiac Surgery Center. Later he was offered the directorship of one of the two Departments of Cardiology at the center. The legacy of the late Aristotle Onassis was to establish a center that would provide quality cardiology and cardiac surgery care to Greek patients at home rather than requiring travel abroad. Eight years later one can safely state that indeed the original goal of the Onassis Center has been accomplished to a significant degree. Apart from a very heavy load of cardiologic interventions, the Onassis

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FIG. 1 Dennis V. Cokkinos.

Center ranks among the first 10 in scientific output annually in Europe.

Dennis Cokkinos has been very active at the national and international levels of organized cardiology. He was elected President of the Hellenic Cardiological Society (1989–1990), Vice President of the European Society of Cardiology (1989–1990), and member of the Executive Scientific Council of the same society. He is also a member, by invitation, of the British Cardiac Society and corresponding member of the French Cardiac Society, fellow of the American College of Cardiology, member of the American Heart Association (Hypertension Council), Chairman of the Working Group of the European Society of Cardiology on the Exercise Physiology, and numerous other international and Hellenic societies. Dennis has been a visiting professor in many European and U.S. medical schools.

In the year 2000 he was appointed Clinical Professor of Cardiology at Emory University School of Medicine where he lectures a number of times during the academic year. Dennis has been a participant and often a member of the steering committee in several clinical trials under the auspices of the European Society of Cardiology.

In Dennis's curriculum vitae are listed over 125 articles in peer-reviewed journals, approximately 350 abstracts, and 17 chapters in cardiology books. His first book, *Cardiology Problems*, was published in 1975 in Athens; the second, *Cardiological Therapy*, in 1980; and the third, *Acute Myocardial Infarction*, in 1987. The first volume of the second edition of *Cardiological Therapy* was published in 2000, while the second volume is due by the summer of 2001.

The main thrust of Dennis's research activities, in collaboration with scientists from the Department of Pharmacology of the University of Athens, has been the study of preconditioning in diseased hearts. This study is conducted on isolated rat hearts in a Langendorff preparation. Specifically, preconditioning is studied in cardiac hypertrophy, hyper- and hypothyroidism, and a number of other cardiac disorders. This

laboratory has gathered a number of dedicated young scientists, resulting in numerous publications and four Ph.D. theses.

In the teaching arena, Dennis is superb. Regardless of whether it is a short lecture in a cardiology meeting or a formal lecture in a medical school classroom, or whether the lecture is given in Greek or English, he completely satisfies even the most demanding audience. His speech is incisive without being dogmatic, clear without repetition, and appropriately interlaced with subtle humor.

Dennis's clinical skills are very well known beyond the city of Athens, in fact, throughout Greece. High-ranking political figures, former prime ministers, and many personalities in the arts and sciences have sought his medical advice. Yet, over the years he generously donated his time to the least fortunate, the indigent patient.

However, Dennis's accomplishments extend beyond his contributions to medical literature, teaching, clinical research, and practice of cardiology. He is one star in the small constellation of cardiology stars of whom Greece can be proud.

From the mid to late 1980s, a small, select group of cardiologists, Dennis among them, were responsible for Greek cardiology catching up with the rest of the western world. These vintage cardiologists, all of whom trained at reputable cardiology centers around the world, returned to Greece and eventually were elevated to positions of leadership that enabled them to recruit junior associates, also trained in well-known centers abroad, who were eager to advance the frontiers of medicine.

This new cadre of cardiologists, regardless of whether they were in university centers or institutions such as the Onassis Center, began to participate in international meetings, as well as to invite experts in cardiology from abroad to participate in Greek cardiology congresses. This interplay stimulated small-scale research activities that grew larger over the years.

A strong testimony for the significant progress in Greek cardiology is that the number of abstracts submitted to meetings such as the European Cardiological Society, American College of Cardiology, and American Heart Association by Greek cardiologists has increased exponentially in the last 10 years. In fact, at the last meeting of the American College of Cardiology in Orlando, Florida (Spring 2001), Greece, a rather small country, was ninth in the number of accepted abstracts.

Although compared with other western societies the means for basic research in cardiology are relatively meager in Greece, the collaboration of cardiologists with basic scientists facilitated the advancement of diagnostic and therapeutic modalities. Thus, in an era of high technology medicine, institutions such as the Onassis Center, in which Dennis has a position of leadership, can take pride in the delivery of excellent medical care, research activities, and training programs, thanks to the high quality of their faculty.

Dennis has always recognized the value of the contributions of every member of his team and sought to involve each one of them. In his position, he has influenced many cardiology fellows and in more recent years numerous medical students. Dennis's natural leadership abilities, combined with his kindness, fairness, and thoughtfulness, have gained him respect and warm affection from his colleagues.