

A tribute to the late, great Georges Mathé (1922-2010)

Georges Mathé sadly passed away on Friday 15th October 2010 at the age of 88. He was a leading figure in innovative hematology both in France and the rest of the world.

Dr. Mathé was born in 1922 and, having participated in the French resistance during the Second World War, went on to complete his residency and fellowship at Paris University under Paul Chevallier and Jean Bernard at the Broussais and Saint-Louis hospitals respectively. He then quickly became interested in immunology under the influence of Bernard Halpern and Jean Hamburger, receiving additional training abroad with Joseph Burchenal and David Karnovsky at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (New York, USA). He subsequently became a professor of experimental cancerology and head of the Department of Malignant Blood Diseases at the Paul Brousse Hospital from 1966 to 1990.



He played a considerable role in the foundation of INSERM (Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique), the ICIG (Institut de Cancerologie et Immunogenetique) and the Claude Bernard Research Association. Thanks again,

Above all he will be remembered for his development of innovative training techniques, preclinical animal studies and new therapeutic concepts and schemes which strongly impressed his students, residents, fellows and the wider scientific community at a time when many other teams struggled to get results. As a measure of his reach, it is fair to say that most active clinical hematologists in France, including myself, underwent part of their training under his mentorship. In terms of societal links, he was a founding member of EORTC and a formative figure to the circle of experts that went on to form the EBMT in 1974.

With a few friends and colleagues, namely Georges Santos (Baltimore, USA), Dirk van Bekkum (Leiden, The Netherlands), Don Thomas (Seattle, USA), J. van Rood (Leiden, The Netherlands) and J.F. Loutit (Harwell, UK), Dr. Mathé led scientific investigation into treatment of radiation accident victims, treatment of leukaemia, bone marrow transplantation and what he named "adoptive immunotherapy". He famously treated six atomic scientists in 1959 that had been inadvertently exposed in Yugoslavia to unmeasured doses of irradiation (today estimated at below 6Gy). They underwent bone marrow transplantation in a manner which showed remarkable intuition given the extremely limited knowledge of the subject at the time. An amateur video shows many donors cycling to his clinic in Villejuif to donate their marrow, with the patients subsequently receiving several incompatible marrows. Despite these poor procedures by today standards, four of the six scientists survived and there is still debate over whether the procedure contributed to them surviving their transient aplasia ordeal.

Along with leading members of his team such as Jean Louis Amiel, Leon Schwarzenberg, Françoise de Vassal, M. Schneider, Michel Hayat, David Machover, Claude Jasmin (and many others), Mathé later pioneered the first white cell transfusions using donors with chronic myelocytic leukemia and bone marrow transplantations from single donors. He also described the first observations of Graft versus Host Disease (known at the time as "secondary disease"), the use of immunotherapy with BCG scarring to boost anti-leukemic resistance in patients and the concept of "facilitating" antibodies that would block the tumour antigenic sites and give protection against active immunotherapy. He was also a forerunner in generating the first anti lymphocyte globulin.

It is now clear that Georges Mathé was a visionary, a man before his time. And it is with these few words that I, as one of his former students, attempt to communicate the sentiments that so many of us retain. We are honoured by the interest and effort he put into our training, we remain in awe and admiration of his work and thinking and, above all, we mourn the loss of such a fine man.

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One of Georges Mathé's many past residents and fellows