The history of hernias

Henri Fruchaud (1894-1960): a man of bravery, an anatomist, a surgeon

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Henri René Fruchaud was born in 1894 in Angers, the capital of the French province of Anjou, famous for its history, poets, and wines, where a place called "Fruchaud (or Fruchau) track" can be found. The fortunes of the Fruchaud family rose through their members becoming parish priests and teachers and supervisors in seminaries, who were in a position to push gifted offspring into intellectual professions such as medicine. The great-grandfather of Henri Fruchaud was most probably a peasant. His grandfather, however, was a carpenter, and his father and uncle were physicians. Henri René obtained his first degree in his birthplace and then continued studying medicine in Paris.

During World War I, Fruchaud was still an "Externe des Hôpitaux de Paris" and served for one year as a corporal stretcher bearer and then as an auxiliary doctor ("sous-aide major") in direct contact with the combatants in the Marne, Ypres, Verdun and Somme battles. His bravery was rewarded by the French "Croix de Guerre" (four citations), the "Médaille Militaire" and the Russian Medal of St. George.

In 1919, Fruchaud resumed his medical studies; the next year he passed the difficult competitive examination for the position of "Interne des Hôpitaux de Paris". After finishing his surgical training, he returned to Angers in 1924 and practiced general and thoracic surgery with intensity and zeal. He also visited the great surgical centers in Germany (Berlin, Hamburg, Heidelberg), Austria (Vienna), England (London), Switzerland (Basel, Davos, Lesin, Zurich), Italy (Rome) and Belgium (Brussels, Bruges) and thus was at home in many hospitals in the world.

In 1937, Fruchaud was named the first Professor of Clinical Surgery at the newly formed Angers School of Medicine. At the opening ceremony of the School on November 23, 1937, he gave the official lecture, which was titled "In praise of the Spirit of Surgery". The text of this strongly expressed lecture reflected his ardent devotion to surgery. By this time, Fruchaud had published more than 200 articles in a variety of fields, including anatomy, anaesthesia, plastic surgery, surgery of the thyroid, neck, digestive tract, urogenital system and thorax, as well as orthopedic and cancer surgery.

Such a man could not be deflected by the Armistice of June 1940, so that he joined de Gaulle in London and was named Director of the Military Health Service of the "Forces Françaises Libres". Although by then he was middle-aged and exempt from military service, Fruchaud enlisted voluntarily and participated in the most difficult military actions and campaigns of World War II including Dakar, Douala, South Africa, Somalia, the deserts...
of Eritrea and Libya, and in Syria and Lebanon (with Lady Spears ambulance). In 1943, he landed with the first French troops in Naples as chief of the famous “Ambulance Catroux”, and took part in the snowy Abruzze campaign, the Cassino attack, and the Anzio landing.

Lady Spears, who is said to have been very authoritative and domineering, was the chief nurse and director of the Lady Spears ambulance. She was the daughter of a U.S. Industrialist, and her husband was an English brigadier. In her book entitled “Journey Down a Blind Alley”, which was written under the pen name of Mary Borden, Lady Spears described Fruchaud as “... hot tempered... restless, quarrelsome and intolerant... but his attitude was faultless. For he was a man of the world as well as a distinguished surgeon...; (with) an enthusiastic mind, a great love of music and an insatiable curiosity for historical things”. She also commented that during the Damas battle, “Fruchaud was a tiger, he could and did work at lightning speed for 24 hours on end... Yet he was 52 years old and suffered asthma”. In his book entitled “Tous n’étaient pas des Anges” (All were not Angels, Paris, 1963) Joseph Kessel, a famous writer and a member of the Académie Française, quoted a sergeant of the French Foreign Legion: “We had another professor with us: a doctor. His name was Fruchaud. He had neither the age nor the health required by a soldier. But he did the whole campaign. At Queren he operated on the battle front, at 2000 meters altitude, two days’ walk from our bases: He saved many men. And we needed that...”. Fruchaud’s dazzling war services have been commemorated by the French “Légion d’Honneur” and the Cross of “Compagnon de la Libération”.

At the end of the war, Fruchaud was tempted by further adventures. He introduced French Surgery to the Middle East. He settled in Aleppo (Syria), from where his reputation spread over the whole Arabian region. The St. Louis Hospital at Aleppo where he worked is still known as “Hôpital Fruchaud”. His social life was also very active, and he is said to have organized shows and concerts by French artists at his personal expense.

In the fall of 1959, Fruchaud returned to France, where he practiced surgery in Poitiers but only for a few months. In the summer of 1960, this great surgeon, who had recently completed his book on upper abdominal surgery, was suddenly overcome by a brain hemorrhage, while at his house in Brunoy near Paris. Henri Fruchaud was buried in Trementines, his native region. The Almighty must surely have granted peace to this brave man, who had cared for so many wounded and sick people, in the “douceur Angevine” (Angevine mellowness, celebrated by Joachim du Bellay, a French XVIth century poet, in one of his famous sonnets) of his last resting place.

Henri Fruchaud Jr. and Dr. Paul René Breger, his nephew and also a surgeon concurred that Fruchaud was a fascinating, although exacting, father, relative, and man. In the memories of his relatives and friends, Henri Fruchaud was a big-hearted man who had the strength of a giant and was an indefatigable worker. He had insatiable curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, whether technical, classical, historical, political, artistic, or musical, as revealed by his personal collection of books and records.

Henri Fruchaud’s publications reflect his practical interest in diverse surgical fields:


2 - Thoracic surgery - in a book titled “Traitement Médico-Chirurgical des Pleurésies Purulentes Tuberculées” (Doin, Paris, 1939), which was written in collaboration with A. Bernou and F. d’Hour, tackling problems of the surgical treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis.


4 - War surgery - in “Chirurgie de Guerre” (Beyrut: Les Heures Françaises), the fruit of his experience during World War I, was written during the campaigns in the Middle East and Italy during World War II. Fruchaud was one of the first war surgeons who favored complete surgical treatment of the wounded as near as possible to the battle front and he practiced what he preached during World War II.

5 - Hernia surgery - He thoroughly researched the subject of groin hernia, based on studies in a number of anato-