

History of Contemporary Medicine in Iran

IN THE MEMORY OF THE LATE PROFESSOR CHARLES OBERLING, THE FIRST DEAN OF FACULTY OF MEDICINE IN TEHRAN

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Professor Charles Oberling (1895 – 1960), the famous French pathologist, was one of the pioneers of modern oncology who described the role of viruses in carcinogenesis. He came to Iran in 1939 and was appointed as the first Dean of Faculty of Medicine in Tehran.

Presented here, is a brief account of Professor Oberling's professional life and his efforts to reorganize Tehran Medical School based on a modern and scientific style.

The first modern higher educational institution in Iran, named the Dar al-Fonun (i.e., House of Techniques), was founded in 1851. It had also a medical department and served as a core for Tehran Medical School

establishment later on. The foundation of the Dar al-Fonun was the result of Amir Kabir's efforts, the reform-minded Chief Minister of fourth King of Qajar Dynasty, Naser ad-Din Shah. Unfortunately, Amir Kabir was assassinated thirteen days after official opening of the Dar al-Fonun. Then, 83 years later, in 1934, the cornerstone of the first modern university of Iran, Tehran University, was laid and a new era in education was ushered in. The faculty of medicine was the first and most important faculty to be established, but it faced heightened problems at the beginning. So, the Iranian government in December 1939 asked the French authorities to send an eminent medical expert to Iran in order to reorganize the Faculty of Medicine of Tehran University. The French officials introduced Professor Charles Oberling, and he came to Iran in 1939.¹⁻⁴

Charles Oberling was born in 1895 in Metz, a town in Lorraine Province of France. His father, Karl, was a railway employee in charge of the mail. The Charles' family moved to Strasbourg shortly after his birth. Charles Oberling attended school and then in 1913, he enrolled at medical college of Strasbourg University and graduated in 1919. Later, he became a pathology resident at that university and since the first part of his professional life, Oberling was dominated by the influence of two figures i.e., Pierre Masson, the renowned pathologist and Director of the Institute of Pathological Anatomy and Amedee Borrel, the Professor of Bacteriology and Hygiene at Strasbourg University. From 1920 to 1928, Oberling worked in Strasbourg with Pierre Masson and completed many of his early pathological researches there. He published about 70 papers on various domains of pathology.⁵

The pathology concepts discussed by Oberling

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Figure 1. Professor Oberling, first row, seventh from the right, at the Medical School of Tehran University with the teaching staff and students of medicine.

were all original. His first important anatomic pathology research was on meningeal tumors in 1922. Then, in 1923, he started his clinicopathological investigations on nephritis. The other main area of his studies concerned the reticuloendothelial system. Numerous other important topics were also the subject of his attention. The hypothesis according to which some human cancers could be caused by filterable microorganisms was indeed suggested in France by Borrel in 1903 and then the possible role of viruses in human cancer was presented in the book of Professor Oberling, which was first published in 1942, and translated into English in 1952 as the

Riddle of Cancer. The book had a tremendous impact on cancer research.⁴⁻⁶

In addition to his valuable scientific studies, Professor Oberling was a provident manager, and had a significant role in reorganization and modernization process of the Medical School of Tehran University. When, in 1939, Oberling came to Iran and was appointed as the dean (Figure 1), he faced major problems such as the scarcity of well-educated and up-to-date medical teachers and lack of proper teaching hospitals for medical students' training. Added to these problems, the various academic chairs were in the hands of a few powerful physicians. After a turbulent period, he



Figure 2. Professor Oberling and his five Iranian colleagues, first row, seated: Professor Oberling; second row, standing from the left: 1) Dr. Mohammad Kar (a French-German trained pathologist), 2) Dr. Mostafa Habibi-Golpayegani (the French-trained pathologist), 3) Dr. Fazlollah Motazedi (French-trained internist), 4) Dr. Hossein Rahmatian (pathologist), and 5) unknown.

was able to achieve his reforms with the support of Iranian officials and his colleagues at medical school. He designed a new educational curriculum based on the modern programs, similar to those in medical schools of Europe, especially France. He also equipped and redesigned Tehran hospitals for educational purposes and had them supervised by medical school authorities, and not the ministry of health officials. In order to staff the medical faculty, Oberling selected his colleagues among well-trained Iranian physicians graduated from reputable scientific centers in Europe (Figure 2). One example was the late Dr. Mohammad Gharib (1909 – 1975), the well-known French trained pediatrician, who is called the father of pediatrics in Iran. He was selected by Oberling as the Professor of Pediatrics of Tehran Medical School. The other main goal of Professor Oberling in Iran was improvement of health standards by controlling the diseases and providing proper facilities for implementation of hygiene. It has been said that when he returned from a vacation to Tehran, in 1945, he had three gifts for his colleagues at the medical school: penicillin for treatment of infectious diseases, DDT for eradication of malaria, and necessary kits for blood group and Rh determination. Finally, after about five fruitful years of service in Iran, Professor Oberling left our country in 1947 and returned to his homeland.^{4, 5, 7, 8}

On his return to France, Professor Oberling was appointed as the Director of Cancer Institute of Villejuif in 1948 and later, as the Head of the Faculty of Medicine at the Paris University in 1959. In Villejuif, he established four research units including one Electron Microscopy Unit with which the cell and its components could be detected more precisely. One example was demonstration of the exact configuration of the nucleolus for the first time. He also organized series of lectures for interpretation of interesting microscopic slides. Professor Charles Oberling passed away in 1960 at the age of 65. He was vanquished by cancer, the enemy he had always fought. On his death, his colleague wrote: “Oberling was both a man of action and a humanist...he loved life...his warmth and enthusiasm won him a myriad of admirers”.⁵ As

the great Iranian poet, Hafez said: “He, who lived with love, never dies”, the statement, which is surely true in regards to Professor Charles Oberling’s life and death.

Three books of Professor Oberling were translated into Persian:

- The lectures of Professor Oberling (Sokhanraniha, Persian title) by Dr. Hassan Mirdamadi, 104 pages, School of Medicine of Tehran University, University Press, Tehran, 1945.⁹ Dr. H. Mirdamadi was a professor of serology and the Head of Vaccination Department at Pasteur Institute, Tehran, Iran.¹⁰
- Riddle of Cancer (Moamaye Saratan, Persian title) translated by Dr. Hossein Rahmatian, Tehran, 1948.^{9, 10} The translator of the book was an associate professor of pathology at Tehran Medical School in 1944 (Figure 2).¹¹
- The Scientific Approach in Medicine (Tebbva-Ravesh Elmiy-e-an, Persian title), translated by Dr. H. Mirdamadi, 120 pages, Ataei Publication, Tehran, undated.⁹

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