François Grémy, a humanist and information sciences pioneer

Patrice Degoulet¹, Marius Fieschi², Marcel Goldberg³, Roger Salamon⁴

¹René Descartes University, Paris, France, ²Aix Marseille University, Marseille, France, ³Versailles Saint Quentin University, France, ⁴Bordeaux School of Public Health

François Pierre Emmanuel Grémy¹, honorary professor at the Montpellier-Nîmes Faculty of Medicine, Officer of the Légion d'Honneur, died on July 22, 2014 at the age of 85 after a rich professional and socially engaged life.

François Grémy was born on March 3, 1929 in Neuilly sur Seine, west of Paris. Having completed his college degree at the age of 16, he hesitates between a purely scientific career and a medical one and finally chose to follow a dual education. At the age of 19, having completed two master degrees in mathematics and in physics, he immediately started his medical studies at the Medical Faculty of Paris. At the age of 23, he passed the Paris resident fellows’ competitive examination, the “Internat de Paris”, and starts clinical work in neuro-physiology and defended in 1958 his MD thesis on the oscillographic study of dysarthria. In 1958, at the age of 29, he was appointed as tenured professor in biophysics at the Faculty of Medicine of Tours. He was the youngest professor of medicine of his generation. Two years later in 1960 he was appointed tenured professor in biophysics at the Pitié-Salpêtrière School of Medicine in Paris where stayed 23 years until 1983. François Grémy also completed a Master Degree in the Theory of Probabilities and a Diploma of the Paris Institute of Statistics. He also was proud of his rank of Chief Physician (colonel) in the French Army.

Between 1966 and 1971, he published five comprehensive textbooks in the three scientific areas where it had previously committed: biophysics, biomathematics, and biostatistics [1-4]. Several generations of French medical students were trained with his textbooks and their revisions and the older ones still remember François Grémy capacities as a teacher to make complex theories look like simple with the sole help of a blackboard and a piece of chalk.

Very soon François recognized the key role played by information sciences in medicine and initiated at Pitié-Salpêtrière in 1966 a curriculum on the medical applications of computing techniques and the need to promote the wedding between medicine and informatics (figure 1).

¹ This text borrows several information facts from a paper written at the occasion of the First IMIA/UMIT Award of Excellence given to François Grémy in 2004 [Degoulet P, Haux R, Kulikowski C, Lun KC. François Grémy and the Births of IMIA. 1st IMIA/UMIT Medical Informatics Award of Excellence given to Professor Grémy. Methods Inf Med 2005; 44: 349-51].
In September 1966 he participated to the 4th international meeting on cybernetic medicine and was immediately convinced by the need for an international association in medical informatics (Figure 2).
In 1967 he established within the International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) the Technical Committee 4 (TC4) on medical informatics. The first meeting of TC4 was held in Paris in April 1968. A dozen nations were represented and François Grémy was elected as president. During his presidency term (1967-1973), François Grémy initiated within TC4 several working groups that showed to represent as many emerging subfields for this new discipline. With J. Anderson, J. M. Forsythe (the TC4 secretary), and J. Site, he organized in Lyon (April 6-10, 1970) the first TC4 meeting on the Information Processing of Medical Records [5]. It was followed by multiple meetings including signal processing, mathematical models in biology and medicine, education with J Anderson and JC Pagès, decision support with FT de Dombal, and data protection with G. Griesser. In 1973 François Grémy negotiated during the preparation of the IFIP meeting in Stockholm the creation of a separate structure devoted to the healthcare field and the disposition of dedicated meeting rooms. This was the first MEDINFO 74 held in Stockholm at the same time and same location as the IFIP meeting (August 5-10). François Grémy acted as the chairman of the MEDINFO 74 Programme Committee, and J. Anderson and J.M. Forsythe were the two editorial committee co-chairs. The International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA) was constituted as a Special Interest Group of IFIP and Jan Roukens, the Dutch representative in TC4, was elected as its first president. François Grémy participates in 1976-1977 to the creation of the European Federation for Medical Informatics (EFMI) as French Representative in the first EFMI board. He is strongly involved as editor and cochair for the second and third meetings in 1979 in Berlin and 1981 in Toulouse.

To foster research in information sciences François Grémy creates in 1969 the INSERM Unit U88 entitled Informatics and Statistics Methodology in Medicine. This will be the framework for his close colleagues to develop clinical informatics but also clinical research, epidemiology and health informatics, and statistics and decision support systems.

François Grémy was not only a renamed teacher and researcher. He was also socially engaged.
In 1981 his long last engagement find his achievement when he becomes delegate president of MRAP, a French organization against racism and for friendship between populations. His colleagues still remind his inaugural conference at the March 1984 National Convention at Unesco in Paris (figure 3).

In 1984 François Gremy is appointed as Professor of Biostatistics and Medical Informatics in the University of Montpellier-Nîmes, and chair of the Medical Information Department of the Lapeyronie University hospital. He renews an old residence in Uzès, a small city close to Nîmes, where he will reside up to the end of his life. He publishes his first comprehensive textbook on medical informatics in 1987. But he progressively focusses his research on the applications of health informatics, the assessment of medical informatics technology, and finally to public health. He is appointed in 1990 as Professor of Public Health at the Montpellier-Nîmes Faculty of Medicine. He becomes member of the French National Committee for Public Heath (Haut comité de santé Publique) with a strong engagement for the prevention of tobacco and alcohol dependence, and with his wife Françoise the social integration of autistic patients François Grémy is recognized at the international scale for his key contribution to the development of Medical Informatics. In 1996 he became with Jan van Bemmel one of the two first Europeans recognized as Fellow of the American College of Medical Informatics. In 2004 he receives during the San Francisco MEDINFO meeting the first IMIA Award of Excellence (figure 4).
In France, in addition to being recognized as the father of Medical Informatics in his country François Grémy has left a strong heritage for the development of public health. He has marked the deciders with his political engagement for prevention, social equity, solidarity, and against any clinical form of racism. He never stopped working and writing starting in 2004 a PhD thesis in philosophy and leading a working group on the organization of the French health system. Having received a strong education in “hard sciences” he understood quickly that regarding health, right decisions both at an individual and a population level pass through the lessons of “softer” disciplines. All those that have the chance to meet him recognize his kindness, his deep humanism and his brilliant character and brain. We, signatories to this tribute, are only a small part of all those who benefited during decades of his immense and multiple qualities.