

EMILIO QUEVEDO, HISTORIAN OF COLOMBIAN MEDICINE

Not only is he the author of books recounting the milestones of Colombian medicine over several centuries; he is also the prime mover behind the reconstruction of medical history in Latin America. This is the profile of one of the most outstanding figures in the history of medicine.

He is about to turn 71 and his mind is as active as it was when he was attending the Liceo Antioqueño secondary school and simultaneously studying music and classical guitar at the Conservatory of the University of Antioquia in his native Medellín.

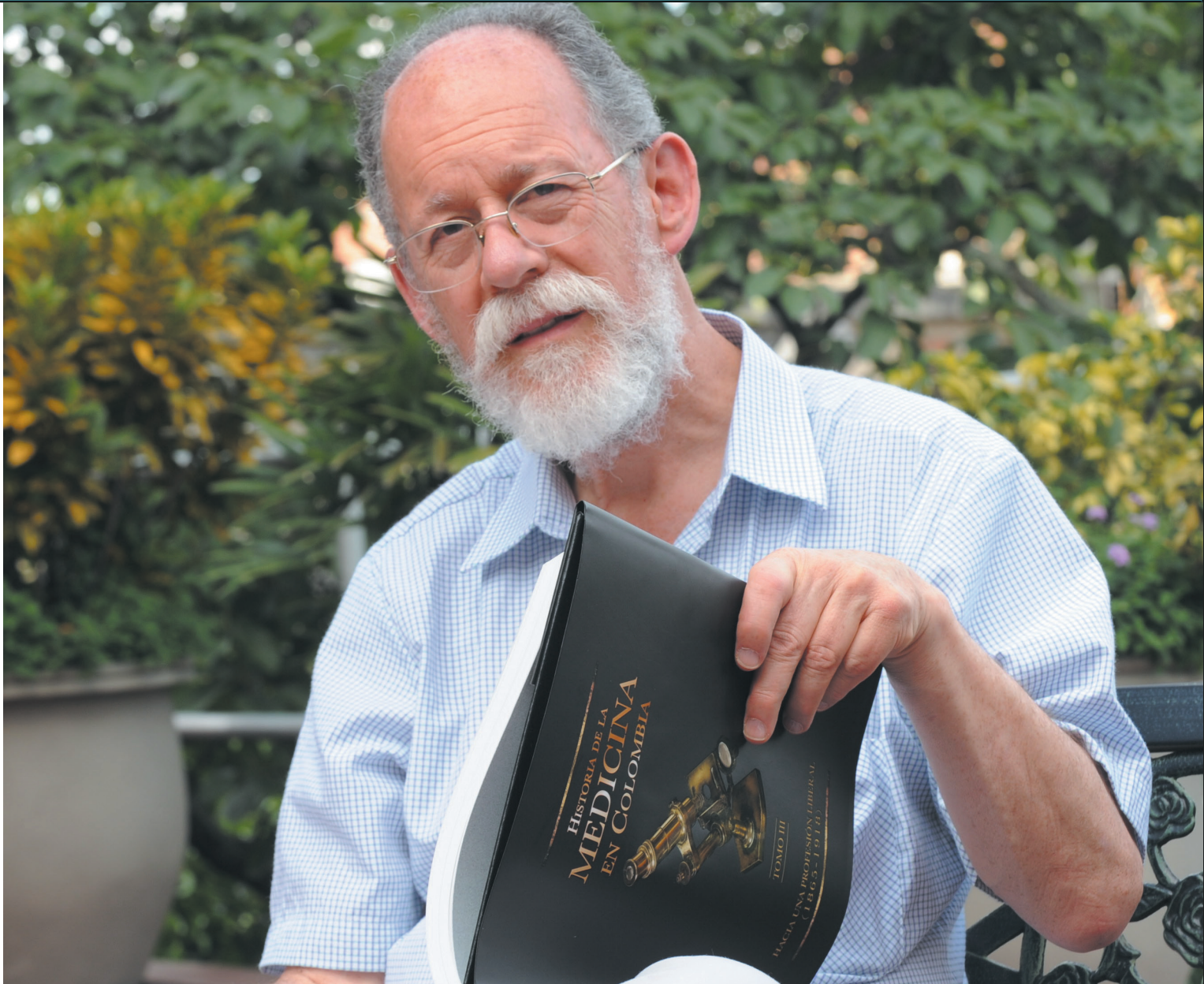
In addition to a prodigious memory that allows him to recall every detail of his long and fruitful life, his energy and straightforward sincerity make Professor Emilio Quevedo Vélez of the School of Medicine and Health Sciences of the Universidad del Rosario a truly outstanding figure among those who are reconstructing the history of medicine in Colombia.

Four elegant volumes of over 200 pages each attest to the way that Quevedo, with the help of an interdisciplinary research group, has compiled the history of the medical profession in Colombia from 1492 to 1975.

PEDIATRICIAN AND RESEARCHER

Quevedo took on this huge task after more than 20 years in pediatrics. In 1994, he closed his practice and began full-time research, aiming to understand what was taking place in this country, propose projects, and teach what he was researching. Consolidating these activities as a career for the past 34 years, he has worked alongside a team of researchers who spent seven years conceptualizing this final project. At the same time, Quevedo has combined his study of medical history with a clinical practice in pediatrics since 1983.

“Our work is not a history of medicine in Colombia. It is a history of Colombia from the perspective of medicine, and a social



history of medicine. It points to medical problems, but places them in the wider context of Colombian history. It is a history of Colombia as expressed through the production of medical and scientific knowledge, the development of the professions in the context of the country's social, political, and economic history.”

MUSIC AND MEDICINE

Quevedo was born in the area of Boston Plaza in central Medellín, but he spent his childhood and adolescence at a country home outside the city, where he played the guitar, having learned to do so at the Conservatory. “On my mother’s side, my family is extremely musical. I remember seeing my mother sing in the Orpheum choir of Antioquia’s Institute of Fine Arts. I used to go to rehearsals with her, and I subsequently joined the choir myself,” he recalls.

That idyll with the arts ended when he was 19 years old and a junior in high school. That was when he decided to spend his

Saturdays accompanying his gastroenterologist father, Tomás Quevedo Gómez, on his home rounds to patients. To his surprise, he became increasingly enthralled with medicine, and when he graduated from high school he decided to apply to the recently-established Faculty of Medicine at the Universidad del Rosario in Bogotá.

“I had learned a lot about medicine and clinical practice on all those Saturdays that I spent with my father, so when I entered the university I already knew quite a bit, especially about the classical French clinical school. This tradition had been handed down through the generations since the days of my great-great-grandfather. It emphasized clinical thinking, the development of the senses, and the correlation of patients with their social and cultural environments.”

In 1967, Quevedo began his medical studies at El Rosario. By the time of his third semester, he was in a group of students with outstanding grades who accompanied medical

residents on their night rounds at the San José Hospital.

Quevedo points out: “I studied a very special kind of medicine, very different from what was being studied in the rest of the country.” He worked in the emergency department, performed electrocardiograms, and assisted in operations as a surgical instrument technician. He also participated in extracurricular practices in other towns, bringing him into contact with public healthcare and people in communities.

“It was an incredible school. I learned a medicine steeped in society, not a hermetic, hospital-based, and mechanical medicine such as that studied today,” he says.

He was always a critical student who argued his points of view with professors, but at the same time he was the best student of his group. He even participated in the student movement then so active and prominent in Colombia. When he had to repeat Biochemistry, a pathologist at the Lorencita Villegas de Santos Children’s Hospital invited him to join him there in pathology. And this gave him his practical education in pediatrics, even though he was still a medical undergraduate.

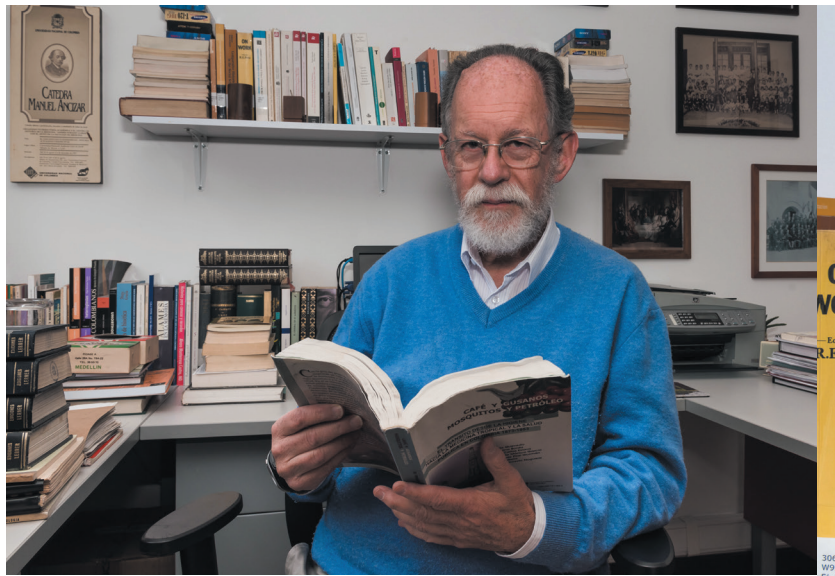
When he returned from his obligatory one-year placement in rural medicine, in Duitama, he decided to specialize in pediatrics. “I realized that Colombia had very serious problems, but its children represented the future and their living conditions were very poor.”

HIS EVOLUTION

Thanks to his medical work at the country’s Family Welfare Institute, Quevedo was given a position at the Children’s Hospital, which allowed him to enroll in the School of Pediatrics at the Universidad del Rosario. From there he transferred to the school of pediatrics at the University of Antioquia, where he trained in his specialty.

His experience there influenced Dr. Quevedo, marking out his path towards a career as a researcher in Colombia’s history of medicine. There were three distinct traditions represented at the university: the French school, the US school, and social pediatrics, which was heavily influenced by Mexican medicine.

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“We should reconceptualize health in Latin America, and that is our goal,” says Professor Emilio Quevedo, Director of the Group for the Social Study of Science, Technology, and the Professions at the Universidad del Rosario.



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”
Emilio Quevedo
Researcher



“Since I had to make a personal decision,” recalls Quevedo, “the first thing I needed to do was study the history of pediatrics in order to understand the three schools. I realized that history was a fundamental tool for understanding medicine, and from that moment, the study of history became my guide to thinking and analysis.”

Subsequently, Quevedo worked at the Hospital Materno Infantil, Bogotá in obstetrics and with the newborn, moving later to the new Faculty of Medicine at the El Bosque University, then known as the Colombian School of Medicine. Beginning in 1979, he worked full-time at the El Bosque Clinic with the newborn, while running an ongoing seminar in



epistemology and the history of science and medicine.

“That’s when I began to conduct research, because in our first few semesters we taught history of world medicine, but beginning in the fifth semester we began to look at the history of medicine in Colombia. Since there were no good books on this topic we began to build around what we were teaching,” he remembers.

For 12 years, he conducted his own “self-doctorate” with the students and professors at El Bosque. He published his first scientific articles on the studies he was undertaking, and got to work on initiating the faculty’s discipline in history of medicine, a subject that had been shut behind the closed doors of the country’s medical faculties for some 50 years.

HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

In 1991, Quevedo Vélez was conducting research and directing a program at COLCIENCIAS, Colombia’s Administrative Department of Science, Technology and Innovation. That year, he and researcher Néstor Miranda published a ten-volume social history of science in Colombia and participated in a comprehensive reform of the national system of science and technology.

Two years later, when Antanas Mockus was rector of the National University, Que-

vedo joined the Faculty of Medicine as a research professor. He established the Center for the History of Medicine, and worked for 14 years leading numerous research projects. In the meantime, he earned a Ph.D. in the social study of science from Australia’s Deakin University.

Since 2009 he has been a full-time professor at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences and directed the Social Studies in Sciences, Technologies, and Professions Research Group (GESCPT) at the Universidad del Rosario. Along with the latter, he is now planning the launch this coming June of a high impact project: a five-volume comparative history of medicine in Latin America that will encompass the relevant past events in 10 countries: Cuba, Mexico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Colombia.

“Its ultimate goal,” says the professor, “is to establish a platform for knowledge on the reality of medical practice in these countries as a first step to constructing a model for top-to-bottom global health that will not depend on the imposition of metropolitan, North-American, or European approaches, but embrace a health vision constructed communally from within those countries based on understandings of their own situations. We seek nothing less than a full rethink of health in Latin America,” he concludes. ■

QUEVEDO, RECOGNIZED AS A RESEARCHER EMERITUS BY THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT

In 2016, Emilio Quevedo Vélez was recognized by COLCIENCIAS as a Researcher Emeritus, an honor bestowed by that institution through the National Science, Technology, and Innovation framework to Colombian researchers based at national institutions who have made significant contributions to science, technology, and innovation through their scientific and academic careers, contributions, and output.

“After many years, COLCIENCIAS has honored me with the distinction of Researcher Emeritus. This honor is recognition for an academic career focused on research and teaching that has shared with the academic community the results of studies carried out by myself and teams I have led, groups typified by teamwork focused on training researchers from undergraduate level and onwards,” comments Professor Quevedo Vélez on the award.