

OBITUARY

JOSÉ BORGES SALES (1911-2006)

José Borges Sales, MD, a tropical disease specialist from northeastern Brazil, has his name intimately linked to the history of visceral leishmaniasis (kala-azar) in the State of Ceará, Brazil. He was born on February 10, 1911 in Paraíba State, northeastern Brazil, and graduated from medical school in 1937, in Salvador, Bahia. He worked as a family physician in several municipalities and four States, from 1938 to 1944. In 1945 he was appointed Head of the Central Laboratory of the Department of Health of Ceará, as a public official of the National Department of Health.

The discovery of kala-azar in Brazil was contemporary with his medical student years. Indeed, Kala-azar was first described in Brazil, in 1934, by Penna [1], through post mortem liver specimens meant to screen for yellow fever. At that time a law was passed determining that all individuals who died of an acute febrile illness should have a liver specimen removed for histopathological examination. The procedure was carried out by a lay person, using an instrument called viscerotome. The liver material was usually obtained in the

Though visceral leishmaniasis was shown to be endemic in 8 States, in that first report [1], only 32 cases were diagnosed in living people (*in vivo*) from 1936 to 1952 [2,3], a number smaller than the 46 cases seen by Aragão in Sobral, Ceará, in the early months of 1953 [2]. The epidemic of Sobral was so severe that Pessoa, in a visit to that city on september twenty-first, 1953, was able to see 52 cases of kala-azar, which were, under the observation of Dr. Aragão [4]. That epidemic had such an impact that the federal Government decided to create a specific structure to deal with

Alencar, who dedicated most of his life to the study of kala-azar, was appointed physician in charge of the control of visceral leishmaniasis in Brazil. In 1953, specialists were sent to Sobral to make a clear assessment of the situation and here again appears Dr José Borges Sales as a member of the group, as clinician, microbiologist and public health official. In those days the routine method used to approach a diagnosis of kala-azar was to spleen aspirate; however José Borges, fearing the risks of that procedure, chose to perform bone marrow aspirates, and did it in 7 children; in six of them he found out amastigotes in the smears [5], findings which confirmed the visceral leishmaniasis epidemic.

The magnitude of the problem was enormous; from 1953 to 1957, 1840 cases of visceral leishmaniasis were diagnosed *in vivo* in Brazil; 1493 cases (80%) were from Ceará [3]. In 1949 Dr. Borges Sales was appointed Professor of Microbiology of the Federal University of Ceará, position from which he only retired in 1981. His writings were mostly concerned with the endemic diseases in Ceará. In 1952, even before the Sobral epidemic, he was concerned with leishmaniasis [6] and his interest in the State of Ceará was gigantic, so that, in 1978, he wrote a book listing all articles published by physicians from the State he had adopted as his second homeland. After retiring Dr. Sales continued very active in the local medical society, as member of the Ceará Academy of Medicine, taking responsibility for editing all publications of that collegiate. He published 50 papers and 4 books, the last one in 2005

José Borges Sales died on may 12th, 2006, at the age of 95.



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