



In memory of

ODILE SCHWEISGUTH

France

1913 - 2002

Odile Schweisguth, a leading French paediatric oncologist, was born on March 2, 1913, to a French army officer. She was a fifth child and spent much of her childhood in Germany where her father was stationed during World War II. She never married but had 29 nieces and nephews.

She spent her entire career fighting for the welfare of her young patients. She is widely celebrated for her pioneering work in paediatric oncology and for her instrumental role in establishing this branch of medicine as a recognized discipline in its own right.

Career and Accomplishments

Schweisguth began her studies in Nancy but later transferred and graduated from the University of Paris Medical School in 1939 when her father retired. Despite the challenging times during World War II, she was resilient and focused on her medical career.

She began her career as a young doctor at Hopital Enfants Malodes and later at the Gustave-Roussy Institute at the Villejuif Hospital where a paediatrician was needed to take care of children sick with cancer. This became the turning point of her career. Here, she discovered her passion for

"Why do I

need

medals?"

cancer research and her dedication to improving the prognosis of cancer-struck children. There, in 1951, she became a Chief in Paediatrics.

Most notably, Schweisguth established the paediatric oncology department at the Gustave-Roussy Institute in 1952, the only institution in France specializing in childhood cancer at the time. This was a significant moment in the history of paediatric oncology because it was one of the first such departments to be formed worldwide. By focusing specifically on paediatric cases, Schweisguth was able to implement specialized care and research strategies that catered to the unique needs of children with cancer.

Not content with revolutionizing cancer treatment in France, Schweisguth sought to improve paediatric oncology worldwide. Recognizing the need for international cooperation in cancer research and treatment, she co-founded the International Society of Paediatric Oncology (SIOP) in 1968. As its first President (1969 – 1971), she was instrumental in guiding its growth and establishing a global network of paediatric oncology professionals devoted to improving outcomes for children, adolescents and young adults with cancer.

Schweisguth was also credited with the development of the first classification system for childhood tumors, along with developing therapeutic protocols specific to paediatric cancers. She significantly advanced our understanding of the nature of childhood cancer and pioneered treatments that have since become standard in the field.

Moreover, she devoted her life to educating the next generation of doctors. She took it upon herself to provide formal training in paediatric oncology, laying the groundwork for the specialty as we know it today. Her mentoring and guidance have left a lasting legacy on countless doctors and researchers in the field.

She advocated for establishing relationships with

other health care professionals who had an interest in oncology, such as pediatric pathologists, radiologists, radiation therapists, surgeons, and nurses.

Legacy and Impact

Odile Schweisguth's life and achievements serve as a beacon for paediatric oncologists and medical professionals worldwide. Her passion, dedication, and commitment to her field have not only saved countless lives but also laid the foundation for future advancements in paediatric oncology. Her legacy is a powerful reminder that through passion and perseverance, it is possible to create profound change in the world of medicine. Many women and men globally follow Odile Schweisguth in her footsteps seeking to care and cure children, adolescents and young adults affected by childhood cancer.

While Odile Schweisguth passed away on February 25, 2002, her contributions to paediatric oncology continue to live on. Her relentless efforts to understand and fight childhood cancer revolutionized the field, leading to significant improvements in survival rates and quality of life for affected children worldwide. As a testament to her immense contributions, SIOP established the Odile Schweisguth Prize in her honor in 1978 when Odile retired; the Prize is awarded annually to individuals who make significant advancements in paediatric oncology. After retirement, she continued to keep in touch with 500+ of her surviving patients, whom she considered a second family. Many remember her as “Tante Odile.” Following up with her patients was in Odile’s mind a commitment to continuity of care.

Very modest, she kept all her medical certificates displayed in her toilet at home; she angered French Prime Minister for refusing the Legion d’Honneur, the highest civil honor medal in France. ‘Why do I need medals?,’ she explained at the time (The Times, 2002).