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## René Gerónimo Favalaro (1923–2000): the challenging dream of a heart surgeon

**KEYWORDS** René Favalaro; coronary artery bypass; chronic artery disease; revascularization; cardiac surgery; medicine history

### Country doctor and heart surgeon

Born in the Argentinian city of La Plata on July 14, 1923, René Gerónimo Favalaro was the grandson of Italian immigrants [1]. Growing up, Favalaro would often accompany his uncle, a general practitioner, to the hospital. This close connection later guided him to pursue a medical career and he graduated *summa cum laude* from La Plata University in 1949 [1–3].

When he applied for a position at the Rawson Hospital in Buenos Aires, the offer he received required him to join the ruling Peronist Justicialist Party, which he refused [2]. Eventually, Favalaro replaced an ill doctor whose practice was located in Jacinto Aráuz, a small village in the southwest of the dry and deserted pampas. Favalaro married Maria Antonina Delgado in 1950, and ended up working in this small town with the help of his brother Juan José Favalaro, also a physician [1–4].

Over the course of nearly a decade, he built his own operating room, trained general and surgical nurses, set up a local blood bank and educated thousands of patients on how to prevent common diseases. In his memoirs ‘The challenging dream of heart surgery’, he suggested that all doctors in Latin America should be required to work among the poor at one time during their careers [2,3].

Although his practice was essentially located in a remote region, he still maintained his academic activity in La Plata. One day he expressed his interest in cardiovascular procedures to Professor Jose Maria Mainetti, who recommended to him to visit the Cleveland Clinic in the United States [1–4].

In 1962 he moved to the Cleveland Clinic. ‘Because I had been able to save money, I pointed out that I was not asking for a salary but for an opportunity to learn’ he wrote [2]. At 38 years old, Dr Favalaro worked first as student, then as a resident and finally as a member of the surgical team, in collaboration with Drs. Donald B. Effler, chief of cardiovascular surgery, F. Mason Sones, Jr., in charge of the Cineangiography Laboratory, and William L. Proudfit, head of the Department of Cardiology [1–4].

Favalaro was fascinated by how coronary angiography, which had been developed by Mason Sones, could pinpoint lesions in the coronary artery. However, early attempts to surgically resolve these coronary obstructions had failed [4]. In 1964, Soviet cardiac surgeon Vasilii Kolesov performed the first successful internal thoracic artery–coronary artery anastomosis [5], followed by Michael DeBakey in the United States [6]. Favalaro had the idea of using the saphenous vein as a graft to bypass coronary stenosis and standardised the method [7], designing a new self-retaining

retractor to dissect mammary arteries [8]. On 9 May 1967, he saved the life of a 51-year-old woman who had a potentially deadly right coronary artery obstruction. The procedure involved connecting her to an artificial heart-lung machine, harvesting a saphenous vein from her leg, and using the vein to redirect blood flow beyond the blockage. The operation, the first of its kind to be reported in a medical journal, was a success [2,7]. Eight days later, Sones would confirm by angiography that the bypass was patent; 20 days later, angiography showed revascularization of the right coronary artery with an excellent distal runoff [2,9].

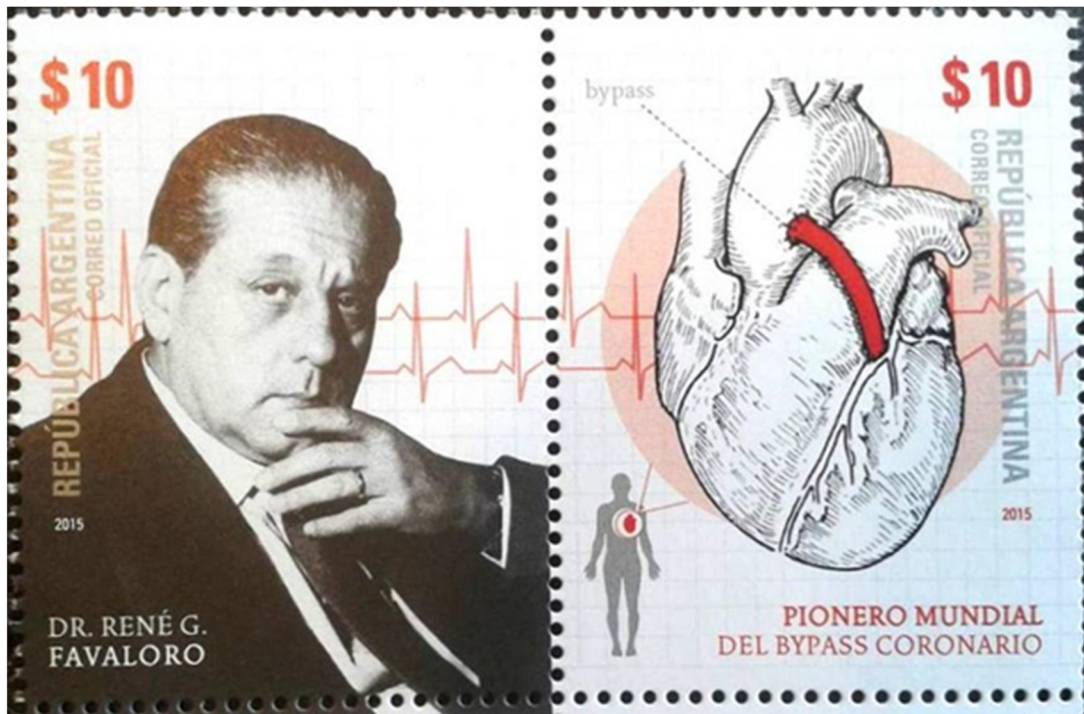
By 1968, Favalaro and his colleagues were combining the revascularization technique with valve replacement and ventricular aneurysmectomy, and performing the first bypasses for acute myocardial infarctions [2,9–11]. In 1970, invited by Donald Ross, Dr Favalaro performed the first coronary artery bypass at the National Heart Hospital in London [2]. The Cleveland Clinic became a renowned centre for cardiac surgery, attracting patients and worldwide surgeons to Favalaro’s operating Table (2).

### A life commitment

Despite a raft of enticing offers from some of the US’s most prestigious institutions, Favalaro decided to return to Argentina in 1971. ‘It was a difficult decision. I gave serious thought to this matter and finally considered that my work and my duties were needed in Latin America’, he wrote [2]. He became director of cardiac surgery at the Güemes Hospital in Buenos Aires, which evolved to become the most important medical centre in South America. It was there that he performed the first heart transplant in Argentina in 1980 [2,3].

The Favalaro Foundation was established in 1975 as a not-for-profit organisation by René G. Favalaro, with three main goals: providing medical care, generating scientific knowledge, and educating health professionals [2,3]. Favalaro succeeded in raising US \$55 m for his medical institution in which he treated thousands of patients – the majority free of charge – while also training hundreds of surgeons [3,4]. At the same time Favalaro established the Favalaro Institute for Research and Education with his brother Juan José [2,3]. This was a private, non-profit institution that mainly supported basic research, a very uncommon entity in South America. In 1993, he also established the Favalaro Institute Medical School to train the future doctors for Argentina [2,3].

Favalaro was an active member of the National Commission of the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP)



**Figure 1.** The Argentinian postal service honoured René Favaloro's medical accomplishments by releasing commemorative stamps on July 13th 2015 (10 pesos x2). Private Collection.



**Figure 2.** Commemorative stamp of for René Favaloro centennial on July 12th 2023 -240 pesos- Private Collection.

established after democracy was restored in Argentina in 1983 [3,4]. He and other respectable personalities were in charge of investigating the disappearance of more than 6,000 Argentinians under the previous military dictatorship [3,4]. He authored 'Recuerdos de un médico rural' (1980) [2]; 'The Challenging Dream of Heart Surgery' (1993) [3] y 'Don Pedro y la Educación' (1994) [11] and more than three hundred papers in his speciality. His passion for Latin

American history inspired him to write two books about General San Martín, the famous nineteenth century hero of Americas: '¿Conoce usted a San Martín?' (1987) [12] and 'La Memoria de Guayaquil' (1991) [13]. Favaloro received countless international distinctions, among which the following stand out: the 1979 John Scott Award, awarded by the city of Philadelphia, USA; the creation of the Chair of Cardiovascular Surgery 'Dr René G. Favaloro' (Tel Aviv University, Israel, 1980), the 1989 René Leriche Prize, awarded by the International Society of Surgery; the Gifted Teacher Award, awarded by the American College of Cardiology (1992); the Golden Plate Award from the American Academy of Achievement (1993) [2-4].

However, with time and Argentina recurrent economic crisis, the Favaloro Foundation began experiencing financial difficulties. At the age of 77, Dr Favaloro was faced with nearly US\$ 18 million in losses due to defaults in payments from other hospitals and health insurance companies [3,4]. Like a modern Don Quixote, he tried desperately to salvage the Foundation, tilting at windmills.

## Epilogue

On July 29, 2000, René Favaloro wrote on his last letter: 'my return to Argentina -after having achieved a prominent place in cardiovascular surgery- was due to my eternal commitment to my homeland. I never lost my roots. I returned to teach, to do research and to pursue a medical care activity. A crisis committee with external advice has begun to operate at the Foundation. Yesterday the first layoffs began to take place. I'm tired of fighting and fighting, galloping against the wind as Don Atahualpa Yupanqui used to sing. I can't change. It has not been an easy decision but it has

been a thoughtful one. Do not speak of weakness or courage. The surgeon lives with death; death is his inseparable companion: with her I go hand in hand' [4].

The man who had performed and communicated the world's first coronary artery bypass surgery using a vein graft, the surgeon who did the first cardiac transplant in Argentina, and set up one of South America's most prestigious medical institutions pointed a gun at his own heart and committed suicide in his apartment (Figures 1 and 2).

In honour of Dr Favoloro's death, Argentinian President Fernando de la Rúa declared a national day of mourning. In his last wishes, Favoloro explicitly renounced any public funeral acts. He rather asked his ashes to be scattered somewhere nearby Jacinto Aráuz, his cherished little town where his dreams of helping patients started [4].

Coronary artery bypass marked a major milestone in the treatment of coronary artery disease [14,15]. René Favoloro assisted so many hearts during his life time—and somehow he continues to do so 25 years after his death, thanks to the pioneering work he did in the field of cardiac surgery. Favoloro trained more than 400 physicians that were educated at his Foundation, following his philosophy: 'only by persistent efforts, with passion and honesty, will our dreams come true' [2,3].

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### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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