

Patrick Guenin

Dialogue With an Adventist Pediatrician in France



Patrick Guenin was born in London, England, of immigrant Swiss parents. He studied at the Institut Adventiste du Salève, in France, and then from 1955 to 1966 at the renowned medical school of the University of Montpellier. He is now a pediatrician in the beautiful city of Annecy, located 40 miles from Geneva, Switzerland. In addition, Dr. Guenin serves as director of the Health and Temperance Department for the Franco-Belgian Union and president of the French-Speaking Adventist Medical Association (AMALF). His professional and service activities are well known in the area where he lives and also among Adventists in other parts of Europe. At present he is a lay member of the General Conference Committee, representing the Euro-Africa Division. Dr. Guenin and his wife, Dany, have four children—two daughters and two sons.

■ *Dr. Guenin, why did you become a physician?*

I am a son of Adventists, and for me three careers seemed to represent best my ideals: minister, teacher, or physician. Since my youth I have felt a real passion for medicine. It has offered me an extraordinary opportunity to live my Christianity in the real world. It has allowed me to serve, to help my fellow human beings, and to alleviate much suffering.

■ *What persons have had the strongest influence on your life?*

My father died when I was only 10 years old and my family sent me to study at our school in Collonges-sous-Salève. I believe that having been educated in an Adventist school for nine years influenced me for the rest of my life. All the teachers—and particularly Mrs. Talle—served as Christian models and provided me with valuable orientation in my choices.

■ *You chose pediatrics as a specialty; was it because you love children?*

Originally I wanted to be a gynecologist, but during my internship in pediatrics I discovered my true vocation.

■ *Pediatricians have a reputation, according to some research, of being kind and gentle. You fit the profile! Why did you settle in Annecy?*

For the proximity of an Adventist church and the Institut Adventiste du Salève, our major educational institution in this area. When I arrived in Annecy, I was the fourth pediatrician in the city. Today, there are 30!

■ *Your influence in the city is well known. Did you want to have a part in its life as soon as you arrived?*

I had not thought about it. Being the son of Adventists, educated in an Adventist school, my wish didn't go any farther than to practice my profession well and to be a good church member. One day in 1970, pastor Paul Tièche insisted on my leading a Five-day Plan to Stop Smoking. The experience was a revelation for me! I discovered that I could help people as a physician and also make my church and its message known. A few years later, the same Paul Tièche,

when he became the Franco-Belgian Union president, established the Health and Temperance Department and asked me to serve as its director.

■ *You accepted, I assume, with enthusiasm?*

Not really. I am a rather shy person, and this responsibility demanded a great deal of public activities. But I accepted. In 1979 we founded the French-Speaking Adventist Medical Association (AMALF) with 25 physicians as members. Today, the association is open also to other medical personnel and has reached a membership of approximately 500.

■ *What were your objectives when you started this association?*

Basically three:

- To bring together Adventist health professionals from French-speaking countries and to better integrate them into the life of the church;
- To provide our members with an Adventist post-university education;
- To further Adventist mission in the developing countries.

■ *That's why each year you send teams to Africa.*

Right. I was part of the first medical group that went to the Songa Hospital in Zaire in 1987. We were three physicians—a surgeon, a family doctor, and a pediatrician (myself)—and three experienced nurses. You would call it a perfect team! We established a clinic at Kitengué, in a zone without medical services. Today, there is a 300-member church and a maternity clinic in that locality, and we hope that soon a hospital will be built there.

Our association continues to support the Songa Hospital. Every year we send to Songa 40 cubic yards of material and medicines. One of our colleagues, Dr. Delgado from Argentina, now the surgeon there, is doing an outstanding job.

■ *What memories do you have of your mission trip?*

It was a most thrilling experience! It completely changed my perspective on life. In fact, I believe that every Adventist health professional should spend some time serving in an area of the world where there are acute needs.

■ *What is the status of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in France?*

We are less than 10,000 Adventists in a country of approximately 60 million inhabitants. Our membership is growing, but very slowly. Religion does not seem to interest most French people anymore. The population is mainly Catholic, but churches are quite empty. It seems that we have not yet learned how to communicate the Adventist message to modern men and women, to make it relevant and attractive to them. And yet we have to go on, using the talents that God has entrusted to each one of us!

■ *In your region, you have become known as "Monsieur Prévention anti-tabac" (Mr. Tobacco Prevention).*

There is some truth in that! The League for Life and Health over which I preside is an organization much appreciated by the authorities in our area. We are the main leaders in planning the activities for the Non-Smoking Day. Through that program there is an increased awareness of the health risks caused by the use of tobacco, and our church is seen as providing a positive service. In addition, the league sponsors

informative lectures on tobacco in the elementary schools of the area. Thanks to the contributions received from league members and other sources, our programs have a sound financial base. We have built a social center where we hold church services and operate Radio Semnoz.

■ *So radio is another facet of your activities.*

In reality it is Dany, my wife, who is the cofounder of this local radio station. Started in 1982, it is today one of the most appreciated in the area for its programming. Of course, from the beginning, I was supportive of the project and much involved on behalf of our League for Life and Health. I was surprised to discover that many people recognized my voice in the broadcasts. Radio Semnoz is a collective project. Thirty persons form our team, of whom 12 are involved in program production and three work full-time.

■ *Radio Semnoz is an Adventist radio broadcasting in a strongly Catholic area. What is the reaction of your listeners?*

Everybody knows we are Adventists! People like our programming and, in fact, there is a listeners' association that sponsors Radio Semnoz. We also publish a magazine for members of the association. Our station, through its local broadcasts, contributes to creating a positive image for the church. According to recent polls, 8,000 persons listen more than one hour per day.

■ *Remarkable! What activities do you envision for the future?*

Our League for Life and Health is now officially recognized at the regional level. It has six local affiliates. Through them we are planning to expand our health prevention campaigns in the schools.

■ *How do you personally keep your spiritual life strong?*

I am very busy person, but I look forward to each Sabbath, knowing that in church I will find Christian fellowship and spiritual nurture. We live in a beautiful area of the French Alps and the nature that surrounds us reminds me every day that God is our Creator and we are His creatures. Helping people in need and cooperating with my colleagues in worthy projects also strengthens my spiritual life.

■ *What advice would you give to Adventist medical students in non-Adventist institutions of higher learning?*

Preparing to become a health professional is an exciting experience. Of course, studying in a non-Adventist university presents certain challenges, some of which I have myself experienced—keeping the Sabbath, maintaining Christian moral standards. . . My best advice is to encourage Adventist students to get together whenever possible. Form an association. Go to church regularly. The church needs you and you need the church! We were a lively group of students at Montpellier University, involved in religious, social, and outreach activities. The challenge is greater, of course, if you are the only Adventist student in the school and there is no Adventist church in town. But God will strengthen you if you stay close to Him.

■ *Are you happy as an Adventist physician?*

Happy and proud, because health is part of our message. An Adventist physician is encouraged by his faith to fight against sickness both through prevention and through healing. He or she can play an important role in the church and in society at large. Today, science confirms the validity of the Adventist health principles and life-style. This gives us a tremendous advantage and enhances our credibility. Adventists should be known the world over as balanced people, loving what is healthy and doing all they can to improve the lives of their fellow human beings. This vision is a great encouragement in my ministry. □

Interview by John Graz

Dr. John Graz serves as Youth and Communication director for the Euro-Africa Division in Bern, Switzerland.

Dr. Patrick Guenin, president of the Association des Médecins Adventistes de Langue Française (AMALF), can be contacted through his address: 1, Rue du Lac; 74000 Annecy; France. Phone and fax: (33) 50 52 9265.