

Neuroscientist retires after 50 years

SARAH FERGUSON

Organized stacks of paper cover Dr. Leo Renaud's desk at the Ottawa Hospital. The late afternoon sunlight shines through the office window, illuminating flecks of dust in the air.

"We're getting another paper ready to publish," Renaud says. He's a seasoned publishing veteran, with nearly 200 peer reviewed articles under his belt.

And after all of those words, Renaud's research career is winding down. He has been at the Ottawa Civic Hospital – now part of the Ottawa Hospital – for 25 years and spent the previous 25 at Montreal General Hospital. He is qualified as both a clinician and researcher.

"He's one of the most eminent electrophysiologists in Canada," says John Ngsee, who was recruited by Renaud in the 90s. "His credentials are impeccable."

Renaud's recent research involves the effects of cannabinoid receptors in the human body. These receptors are activated by cannabinoids either produced within the body or introduced as cannabis or synthetic compounds, such as THC.

Growing research interest in the effects and potential benefits of THC is coinciding with a theoretically less restrictive federal government. Renaud hopes this will lead to a greater understanding about how THC and the brain interact.

"I wouldn't have predicted this," Renaud says. It's a repeated sentiment. "I would never have thought I'd find myself where I find myself."

"I'm just a country bumpkin who found myself at McGill."

Renaud's father insisted that he go to university, so he enrolled in the arts program at the University of Ottawa. He quickly decided he wanted to change courses.

"I was bored of history, French, English and Latin," says Renaud. He switched into arts pre-med and entered medical school upon graduation.

"In 1960, it was much easier to get into medicine if you had decent marks."

He earned his MD from uOttawa in 1965 and moved to Montreal for his internship. His first day at work began Wednesday morning and didn't end until Saturday evening.

The long hours were some-



SARAH FERGUSON PHOTO

Leo Renaud takes a tour of what remains of his neuroscience lab at the Ottawa Hospital. Renaud is retiring from neuroscience research after working for 50 years in the field. Navigating the very different goals and needs of researches had its challenges.

times difficult for the family. His wife, Lillian, raised their two daughters, Barbara and Francine, while he was working nights or out of town.

"She's been very patient," Renaud says.

Because he often wasn't home, his daughters were always excited when they got to see him.

"As soon as we could see the car, we would hide in the broom closet," his daughter Barbara explains. "He would have to come find us. We were always in the same spot."

"We never got tired of it. I'm sure he did but he always took the time to do it."

It was while doing his internship that Renaud "got bitten by the bug" of conducting neurological research. Working in the lab led him to request to do a PhD.

"You would get thrown out if you tried to do that now," Renaud says with a laugh.

It wasn't until his mid-30s that Renaud's own research lab in Montreal began to operate. It was difficult work but Renaud remembers it – and the people – fondly.

They used to play pranks in the lab. There was an aquarium that Renaud would

regularly take care of and his colleagues would give him a hard time about it.

"Every week we would do something to the aquarium to annoy him," says Dr. Charles Bourque, Renaud's former PhD student. They would put objects like bottles, syringes or a flashlight in the tank.

Another time, Bourque set up a pail of water outside of the door and yelled for a colleague to come out. He set up a camera to capture the reaction.

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Leo Renaud
Former
Neuroscientist

"They were a good bunch," Renaud says with a smile. "You need that camaraderie."

The sentiment is mutual. He has been well respected in leadership positions in both Montreal and Ottawa.

"I can't remember ever seeing him mad," says Bourque.

His positivity was infectious even when the going got tough. Creating and heading

a neuroscience group had its share of challenges. Renaud was faced with navigating the very different needs, goals and directions of the clinicians and the researchers.

"I wouldn't want to do that," says Ngsee, who worked for Renaud at the time.

But Renaud hasn't only faced professional challenges. One hot day, he found himself getting very dizzy and nauseous before a function he was attending in the evening. It was Meniere's disease, a problem within the inner ear that can cause dizziness and vertigo. There have been times Renaud has had to call his wife to pick him up because the symptoms occur quickly and without warning.

"You can't function," says Renaud of the episodes. "It's scary."

The illness also causes progressive hearing loss and tinnitus, a constant background noise within the ear. There is currently no cure but Renaud has managed to continue his work by trying to avoid triggers, such as stress and caffeine.

He also had cancer 17

years ago. It was discovered – and treated – in his maxillary sinus in the early stages. The surgeon was able to remove the affected bone in his cheek. He had to undergo five days of radiation a week for six weeks and lost 30 pounds.

Renaud's positive outlook shines through when he talks about these health setbacks.

"It just makes you feel that every day is a good day," he says.

Renaud has few regrets about his career. If he were to do anything differently, he would have finished his neurology residency in Montreal. He said it would be easier to get along with his medical colleagues if he had but he didn't enjoy the clinical work in comparison to the research and hard science.

"I like the science of discovery and new things," he says. "That'll keep you awake for a long time. When the going's good, you don't want to go home until it's done."

Retirement will open up free time for Renaud. He anticipates spending time with his four grandchildren. He has been amazed watching them grow up – the youngest

is nine and the eldest is 22.

He has also considered taking up the piano again – he made it to Grade 3 piano – but joked that it might drive his wife crazy. He's modest about his musical talents – he can sing and play guitar, piano and violin.

"He was in a band growing up," said Barbara.

"Now that he has more time he's sort of going back to it."

She recalls long nights at the cottage when her father, his sister and his brother-in-law would jam.

Renaud's retirement from research is well deserved after a long, grueling but ultimately enjoyable career. He will be greatly missed by the neuroscience community.

