

François Grémy, a Humanist and Information Sciences Pioneer

François Pierre Emmanuel Grémy¹, honorary professor at the Montpellier-Nîmes Faculty of Medicine, Officer of the Légion d'Honneur, died on July 22, 2014 at the age of 85 after a rich professional and socially engaged life.

François Grémy was born on March 3, 1929 in Neuilly sur Seine, west of Paris. Having completed his college degree at the age of 16, he vacillated between a purely scientific career and a medical one and finally chose to follow a dual education. At the age of 19, having completed two master degrees in mathematics and in physics, he immediately started his medical studies at the Medical Faculty of Paris. At the age of 23, he passed the Paris resident fellows' competitive examination, the "Internat de Paris", started clinical work in neuro-physiology, and defended in 1958 his MD thesis on the oscillographic study of dysarthria. In 1958, at the age of 29, he was appointed as tenured professor in biophysics at the Faculty of Medicine of Tours. He was the youngest professor of medicine of his generation. Two years later in 1960, he was appointed tenured professor in biophysics at the Pitié-Salpêtrière School of Medicine in Paris, where he stayed 23 years until 1983. In addition François Grémy completed a Master Degree in the Theory of Probabilities and received a Diploma of the Paris Institute of Statistics. He also was proud of his rank of Chief Physician (Colonel) in the French Army.

Between 1966 and 1971, François Grémy published five comprehensive textbooks in the three scientific areas where his different training in physics, mathematics, statistics, and



Fig. 1 François Grémy (1966) explaining the need to join Medicine and Informatics and the birth of "Informatique Médicale/Medical Informatics" as a new scientific discipline.



Fig. 2 François Grémy between Jean Claude Pagès and his wife Françoise Grémy at the fourth congress of cybernetic medicine in Nice (September 19-22, 1966).

medicine mutually contributed: biophysics, biomathematics, and biostatistics [1-4]. Several generations of French medical students were trained with his textbooks and their revisions and the older ones still remember François Grémy capacities as a teacher, who could make complex theories look like simple with the sole help of a blackboard and a piece of chalk.

Very soon, François recognized the key role played by information sciences in

medicine and initiated at Pitié-Salpêtrière in 1966 a curriculum on the medical applications of computing techniques and the need to promote the marriage of medicine and informatics (figure 1).

In September 1966, he participated in the fourth international meeting on cybernetic medicine and was immediately convinced of the need for an international association in medical informatics (Figure 2).

¹ This text borrows several facts from a paper written at the occasion of the First IMIA/UMIT Award of Excellence given to François Grémy in 2004 [Degoulet P, Haux R, Kulikowski C, Lun KC. François Grémy and the Births of IMIA. 1st IMIA/UMIT Medical Informatics Award of Excellence given to Professor Grémy. *Methods Inf Med* 2005; 44: 349-51].

In 1967, Professor Grémy established within the International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) the Technical Committee 4 (TC4) on medical informatics. The first meeting of TC4 was held in Paris in April 1968. A dozen nations were represented and François Grémy was elected as president. During his presidency (1967-1973), François Grémy initiated within TC4 several working groups that represented many emerging subfields for this new discipline. With J. Anderson, J. M. Forsythe (the TC4 secretary), and J. Site, he organized in Lyon (April 6-10, 1970) the first TC4 meeting on the Information Processing of Medical Records [5]. The meeting was followed by multiple others including signal processing, mathematical models in biology and medicine, education with J. Anderson and JC Pagès, decision support with FT de Dombal, and data protection with G. Griesser. In 1973, François Grémy negotiated during the preparation of the IFIP meeting in Stockholm the creation of a separate structure devoted to the health-care field and assured dedicated meeting rooms. The result was the first MEDINFO 74 held in Stockholm at the same time and same location as the IFIP meeting (August 5-10). François Grémy acted as the chair of the MEDINFO 74 Programme Committee, and J. Anderson and J.M. Forsythe were the two editorial committee co-chairs. The International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA) was constituted as a Special Interest Group of IFIP and Jan Roukens, the Dutch representative in TC4, was elected as his first president. From 1976 to 1977, François Grémy participated in the creation of the European Federation for Medical Informatics (EFMI) as French Representative in the first EFMI board. He was strongly involved as editor co-chair for the second meeting in 1979 in Berlin and the third 1981 one in Toulouse.

To foster research in information sciences François Grémy created in 1969 the INSERM Unit U88 entitled Informatics and Statistics Methodology in Medicine. This unit was going to be the framework for his close collaborators to develop not only clinical informatics but also clinical research, epidemiology, health informatics, statistics, and decision support systems.

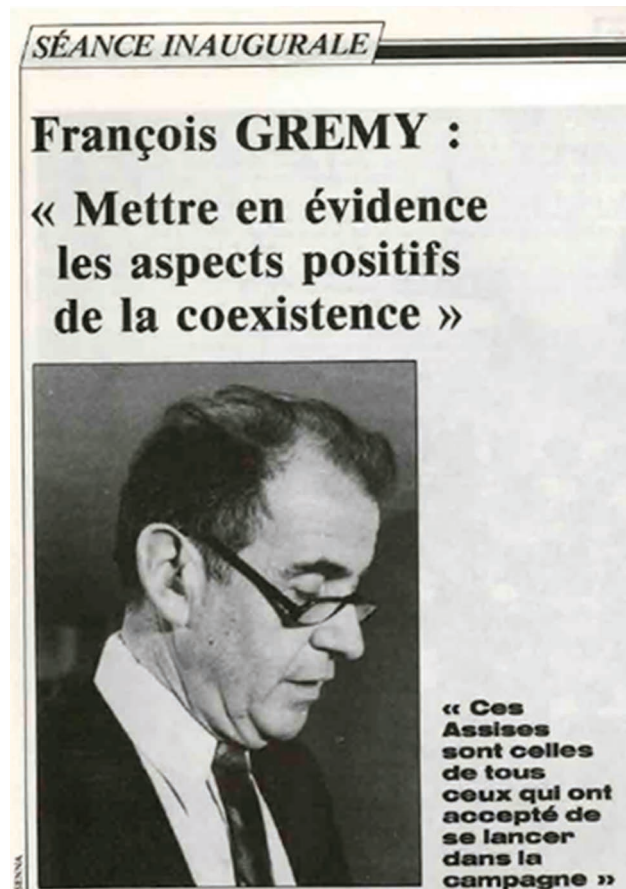


Fig. 3 François Grémy at the National Convention against racism at the UNESCO, March 16-18, 1984, Paris

François Grémy was not only a renowned teacher and researcher. He was also socially engaged. In 1981, his long lasting engagement found a high achievement when he became delegate president of MRAP, a French organization against racism and for friendship between peoples. His colleagues still remember his inaugural conference at the March 1984 National Convention at UNESCO in Paris (figure 3).

In 1984, François Grémy was appointed as Professor of Biostatistics and Medical Informatics in the University of Montpellier-Nîmes, and chair of the Medical Information Department of the Lapeyronie University hospital. He renews an old residence in Uzès, a small city close to Nîmes, where he resided up to the end of his life. He published his first comprehensive textbook on medical informatics in 1987 [6]. However, he progressively focussed his research on health informatics, the assessment of medical informatics technology, and finally on public health [7-8]. He was appointed in 1990 as

Professor of Public Health at the Montpellier-Nîmes Faculty of Medicine. He became a member of the French National Committee for Public Health (Haut Comité de Santé Publique), strongly engaged in the prevention of tobacco and alcohol dependence, and with his wife Françoise championed the social integration of autistic patients.

François Grémy is recognized at the international level for his key contributions to the development of Medical Informatics and the birth of IMIA. In 1996, he became with Jan van Bommel one of the two first Europeans recognized as Fellow of the American College of Medical Informatics. In 2004, he received during the San Francisco MEDINFO meeting the first IMIA Award of Excellence (figure 4).

In France, in addition to being recognized as the father of Medical Informatics in his country, François Grémy has left a strong heritage for the development of public health. He has influenced the decision makers with his political engagement for prevention, social equity, solidarity, and against any clinical form

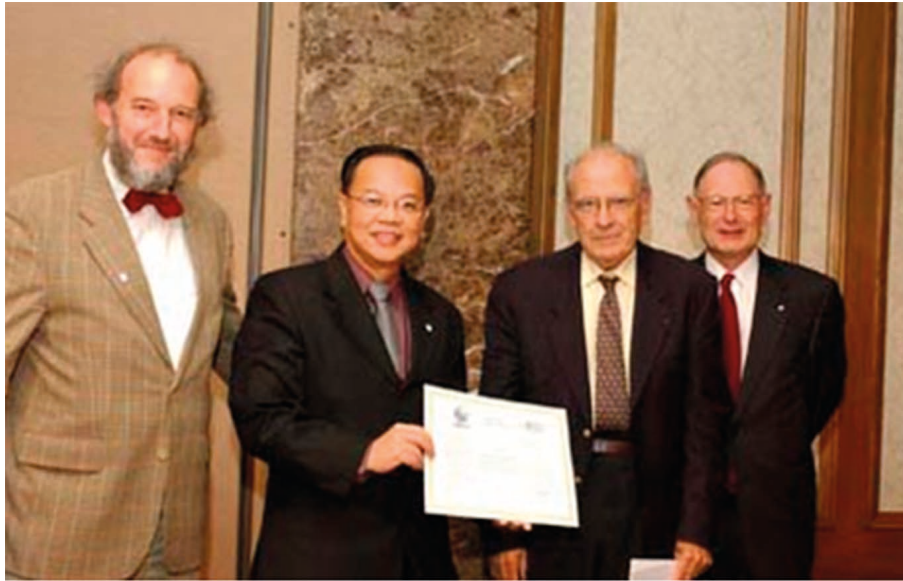


Fig. 4 The IMIA Excellence Award remitted to François Grémy at the MEDINFO 2004 meeting in San Francisco. From left to right (R. Haux, K.C. Lun, François Grémy, and C Kulikowski) [with permission of IMIA]

of racism. He never stopped working and writing and started in 2004 a PhD thesis in philosophy while leading a working group on the organization of the French health system.

Having received a strong education in “hard sciences” he understood quickly that regarding health, right decisions at both an individual and a population level pass through the lessons of

“softer” disciplines and ethical considerations [7,9]. All those that had the chance to meet him recognized his kindness, his deep humanism, and his brilliant character and brain. As signatories of this tribute, we only represent a small subset of collaborators, colleagues and friends who benefited during five decades of his immense and multiple talents.

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