



Maria Cristina Leske

Chancellor, last week if the name Barbados was mentioned on CNN, it would have produced the response “Tiger Woods”. In sporting circles the name Barbados elicits the name of National Hero the Right Honourable, Sir Garfield Sobers. But in the international world of medicine, the name Barbados means Maria Cristina Leske, Distinguished Professor of Preventive Medicine and Ophthalmology at the School of Medicine, Stony Brook University, New York; because she has published more medical papers on Barbados than most other researchers combined.

Born in San Fernando (not Trinidad but Chile), she was the only child of a physician father, later the Head of PAHO in Columbia, and a science teacher mother. Her goal from childhood was to be a doctor. She graduated from the University of Chile School of Medicine, with highest honours, and proceeded to Harvard School of Public Health, on an OAS Fellowship, where she acquired both her Master’s in Public Health, and a class mate and soul mate, her husband Gary.

Now when Cristina does something she does it, as we say in Barbados, “proper”, with great attention to statistical detail. She proceeded to have a family - not just one son, not two, but one - plus two - identical twins – total three, all achieved in 14 months. She thus completed her personal training, at “PhD level and with Highest Honours”, in population statistics, child rearing and family health, before going back to work in Public Health. She resumed a full time career in 1979 – a mere 25 years ago. There she became Professor and Head of Epidemiology, Chair of Preventive Medicine, and in turn Distinguished Service Professor and Distinguished Professor of Preventive Medicine and Ophthalmology. She was the first woman appointed to a Chair in the School of Medicine at Stony Brook.

Her close relationship with Barbados has played no small part in her extraordinary

achievements. The Barbados Eye Studies began 17 years ago. They were her brain child, designed to provide the first population-based data on eye diseases in people of African descent, including glaucoma, cataract, diabetic retinopathy and age-related blindness. Their aim was to document the prevalence, incidence and risk factors for all eye diseases – in other words the amount and the causes of eye disease in Barbados. It was a unique study, and the largest medical study ever in Barbados, on a random sample of almost 5,000 people, followed over a decade. A vast amount of data has been published in more than 100 publications – the largest body of medical research work, led by one person, from the Caribbean. As a result we now have a far better understanding of eye diseases, which will inform sound prevention and health care, while Professor Leske is known around the world as the pioneer of ophthalmic epidemiology.

But she is just as well known for her pioneering work on cancer epidemiology. And she is now involved in a major study of the incidence, risk factors and genetics of breast and prostate cancer in Barbados – the Barbados National Cancer Study, with our own Dr. Anselm Hennis and Dr. Linden Waterman of Cave Hill, and funded by the National Institutes of Health of the USA.

Professor Leske's output is prodigious. Her grant funds run into millions, the number of her papers into hundreds, her reports and book chapters into scores, and her international awards into many pages. Among them are the Distinguished Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching at Stony Brook, election to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Science – the first person from her university to achieve such a distinction – national Congressional recognition as a Local Legend from New York, the 2004 Harvard School of Public Health Alumni Award of Merit, and the Ophthalmologic Society of the West Indies award this year.

Professor Leske, we must admit, is a very little lady. How, you may well ask, does such a little lady produce so much? Well, as they say in Jamaica, "She small, but she talawah!" But also, alongside this little lady, lives an iron man, whose discipline and achievements complement hers. He is indeed an Iron man – not only a distinguished scholar and Professor of Dentistry – but a US triathlon National and World Champion - cyclist, swimmer and marathon runner. But even more remarkably, sons Brian and Kevin, the identical twins, are also World Champion triathletes. All three of her iron men are in team USA, and so the Leskes pace and inspire each other.

Chancellor, for 40 years you, yourself, have inspired several medical graduates and researchers of The UWI and our diaspora. I know that as a scholar and a gentleman, you will take the greatest pleasure in recognizing our Distinguished Professor Cristina Leske, of Stony Brook and this sunny Rock - the most prolific and pre-eminent medical researcher associated with the name Barbados - by conferring on her the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

**Citation on the occasion of the award
of the Honorary Doctor of Science of the UWI,
at the Graduation Ceremony, Cave Hill Campus,
on October 23, 2004**