

Professor Nelson Chaves: 119 years since his birth – The legacy lives on

To write about Nelson Ferreira de Castro Chaves (1906–1982) is an arduous task but at the same time, an enjoyable one, given by his great intellectual potential and his stance as a human being ahead of his time. A physician, nutritionist, and professor, he left behind a grand and irrefutable legacy.¹⁻⁵

After completing his studies at the *Faculdade Nacional de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro*, he returned to Recife in 1931, with a head full of ideas and dreams, to begin his professional career in the fields of Endocrinology and Nutrition. In 1934, he joined the *Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade do Recife* as a professor.

It is worth remembering that, in the early 1940s, he published an article in the traditional *Revista Neurobiologia* (Neurobiology Journal), entitled *Fisiologia da Emoção* (Physiology of Emotion). In 1948, he released two more important works: *Alimentação e Saúde Pública e A Subalimentação no Nordeste Brasileiro* (Food and Public Health and Sub-Malnutrition in the Northeast of Brazil). These works already showed his deep interest in social issues, especially those related to the underprivileged population and the fight against hunger and malnutrition.⁴

Between 1949 and 1951, he took over the position as of Secretary of Health and Social Assistance in the State of Pernambuco, during the government of Alexandre Barbosa Lima Sobrinho. During his tenure, he idealized and created several innovative care services at that time.⁵⁰

In 1950, he founded the *Álvaro Ozório de Almeida* Institute, bringing together the departments of Physiology, Histology, General Embryology, and Operative Therapeutics at the *Faculdade de Medicina do Recife*. During this period, he assembled his first team, which included Dr. Naide Teodósio (1915–2005). In 1956, the *Álvaro Ozório* Institute was transformed into the *Instituto de Fisiologia e Nutrição* (Physiology and Nutrition Institute). The following year, after returning from abroad, he idealized and implemented the *Curso de Nutricionistas da Universidade do Recife* (Nutritionist Course) — affectionately known as the “*Anjos Brancos*” (White Angels) course — considered by many to be his greatest legacy.^{2,3,5}

On December 12, 1959, the first class of the *Curso de Nutricionistas da Universidade do Recife* had graduated, consisted of twenty-six students.

Once again demonstrating his innovative vision, in 1962 at the *Instituto de Fisiologia e Nutrição* was transformed into the *Instituto de Nutrição* (INUFPE) (Nutrition Institute) of the then newly created *Universidade Federal de Pernambuco* (UFPE). Nelson Chaves took over the position as the director of the institute, a position he held until 1971.^{4,5}

With the support of the State government, it was possible to consolidate the new headquarters at the institute. The constant presence of Professor Fernando Figueira (1919–2003) was decisive in this process. A pioneer in women and children's health care in the Northeast, Figueira was key to Nelson Chaves' achievement.^{1,6}

Also in 1962, a temporary pediatric service was set up to care for malnourished children, addressing the serious problem of protein-calorie malnutrition, one of the biggest public health issues at the time.

In this same context, the *Laboratório de Nutrição Experimental e Dietética* (LNED) (Experimental Nutrition and Dietetics Laboratory) was founded, the first of its kind in Brazil. There, they were already working with experimental formulations and innovative protein combinations, promoting the integration of clinical practice and scientific research. The LNED remains today a welcoming and collaborative training space—an essential part of the current Department of Nutrition at UFPE.⁷

In 1963, the intense and productive collaboration between Nelson Chaves and Fernando Figueira resulted in their joined participation in the first food and nutrition survey in the region, a pioneering study that guided public policies and strategies to combat hunger in the Northeast, Brazil.^{3,6}

Also in 1963, the first Post-graduate Course in Nutrition in Public Health began, at the specialization level for physicians, the result of an agreement between the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UFPE Nutrition Institute. By 1970, seven editions of this course had been held, training countless professionals committed to public health.⁵

In 1970, an important international technical-scientific cooperation agreement was signed with the Institute of Food Sciences at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, Switzerland. This agreement strengthened the infrastructure of the institute, allowing to construct the Chemistry, Microbiology, and Technology Laboratories and a Technical Workshop,



which were later integrated into the *Laboratório de Experimentação e Análise de Alimentos* (LEAAL) (Experimentation Laboratory and Food Analysis). This international collaboration remained active until 1980.

In 1971, with the support of the Dean of the Research and Post-Graduate at UFPE, was founded the Master's Course in Nutrition at INUFPE, a milestone in high-level academic training in the country.

With the reform of the university in 1975, the *Instituto de Nutrição* was transformed into the current *Departamento de Nutrição* at UFPE, (Nutrition Department), a structure that remains until today, with outstanding performance in teaching, research, and university extension.⁷

Professor Nelson Ferreira de Castro Chaves passed away on May 24, 1982, at the age of 76, at the *Instituto de Medicina Integral Prof. Fernando Figueira* (IMIP)— at that time was called *Instituto Materno Infantil de Pernambuco* — in Recife. He was alongside his great friend, comrade-in-arms, and supporter, Dr. Fernando Figueira, whom he affectionately referred to as “the man who dragged rocks.”^{1,8}


Together, Nelson Chaves and Fernando Figueira changed the course of medicine and nutrition in Pernambuco. They left a legacy that lives on in actions, ideals, and achievements of each new generation. Yesterday and today are intertwined — and it is in this living memory that we continue to build a more just, healthy, and supportive future.

References


1. Belmar C. Fernando Figueira. O Homem que Arrastou Rochedos. São Paulo: Editora Escrituras; 2007. 288 p.
2. Belmar C. Professor Fernando Figueira - 100 anos. Recife: Editora CEPE; 2020.
3. Costa MCMA, Lago ES. Nelson Chaves: O homem além do tempo – A palavra de um cientista que amava sua terra e sua gente. Coleção nordestina. Recife: Editora Universitária/UFPE; 2007. 396 p.
4. Costa MCMA, Lago ES. Nelson Chaves: Nutrição e desenvolvimento humano: Aspectos Bio-Psicossociais dos problemas alimentares/nutricionais e suas implicações. Coleção nordestina. Recife: Editora Universitária/UFPE; 2008. 380 p.
5. Costa MCMA. Nelson Chaves: O cientista, o pesador e o homem público. Recife: Editora Liceu LTDA; 2012. 145 p.
6. Vasconcelos CAC. Fernando Figueira e a Nutrição. *Jornal do Commercio* (JC), Recife, 24 Mai 2019. Artigo de Opinião, pág. 19.
7. Vasconcelos CAC. Arquivos, revistas e jornais do Memorial Professor Nelson Chaves. Departamento de Nutrição - UFPE/ CCS. Recife; 2024.
8. Vasconcelos CAC. Os 118 anos de nascimento do Dr. Nelson Chaves: Humanista visionário. *Rev Oficina Letras (SOBRAMES-PE)*. 2024; 36: 54-8.

At the invitation of the Editor-in-Chief: Lygia Vanderlei

Carlos Augusto Carvalho de Vasconcelos ¹

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0680-9153>

Fernando Augusto Marinho dos Santos Figueira ²

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8737-4448>

¹ Laboratório de Nutrição Experimental e Dietética. Departamento de Nutrição. Centro de Ciências da Saúde. Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Av. Prof. Moraes Rego, 1235. Cidade Universitária. Recife, PE, Brazil. CEP: 50.670-901. E-mail: carlos.cvasconcelos@ufpe.br

² Superintendente de Ensino, Pesquisa e Inovação. Instituto de Medicina Integral Prof. Fernando Figueira. Recife, PE, Brazil.