

## GRIGORIS LAMBRAKIS (1912-1963) – A GREEK OBSTETRICIAN AND WORLD RENOWNED ACTIVIST

### GRIGORIS LAMBRAKIS (1912.–1963.) – GRČKI OPSTETRIČAR I SVJETSKI POZNATI AKTIVIST

Ioannis D. Gkegkes\*, Marianna Karamanou\*\*,  
Paraskevi-Evangelia Iavazzo\*\*\*, Xanthi-Ekaterini D. Gkegke\*\*\*\*,  
George Androutsos,\*\* Christos Iavazzo\*\*\*\*\*

#### SUMMARY

*Grigoris Lambrakis was a Greek politician, doctor, athlete, and faculty member of the Medical School of Athens University. As an athlete, Lambrakis held the Greek record for long jump for twenty-three years and he also won several gold medals in the Balkan Athletic Games. Lambrakis received an excellent medical education. As lecturer at the University of Athens, Lambrakis became a pioneer of Gynecological Endocrinology. His philanthropy was always evident during his medical career, but he also consistently attended international pacifist meetings and demonstrations. His medical work, and his performance as lecturer of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, have been neglected, if not overshadowed, by his political*

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\* First Department of Surgery, General Hospital of Attica "KAT", Athens, Greece.

\*\* History of Medicine Department, Medical School, University of Athens, Greece.

\*\*\* Rural Practice, Molos, Fthiotida, Greece.

\*\*\*\* IASO, Maternity Hospital, Athens, Greece.

\*\*\*\*\* Gynaecological Oncology Department, Christie Hospital, Manchester, United Kingdom.

*Corresponding author:* Christos Iavazzo, MD, MSc, PhD. 38, Seizani Str., Nea Ionia, Athens, Greece, 14231. Tel: +306948054119. Electronic address: christosiaavazzo@hotmail.com.

career. Lambrakis is recognized worldwide as a martyr for peace. The aim in this essay is to present his life, and especially to elucidate his medical achievements.

**Key words:** Lambrakis; gynecologic endocrinology; peace activist; assassination; athlete.

## INTRODUCTION

Grigoris Lambrakis was a Greek politician, doctor, athlete, and faculty member of the Medical School of Athens University. The aim in this essay is to present his life and especially to elucidate his medical achievements.

### EARLY LIFE

He was born on April 3, 1912 in Kerasitsa, a village close to Tegea in Peloponnese, Greece. He was a poor child from an agricultural area - one of 18 children [1]. After finishing high school in his home town, he moved to Athens in order to attend Medical School (Figure 1). According to his personal diary, his father told him one day: "I'm sorry my child to put you in the mud" [1]. This phrase was the spark that lit the candle of his passion to succeed and to overcome so many obstacles. If his father had not said this, Lambrakis would never have dared to say that he wanted to become a doctor and to leave his village.



Figure 1: Grigoris Lambrakis with his mother.

### ATHLETIC CAREER

Lambrakis was a champion athlete well known in Greece as well as worldwide [2]. He held the Greek record for long jump for twenty-three years (1936–



Figure 2: Grigoris Lambrakis with Olympic medalist Jesse Owens.

1959). He also won several gold medals in the Balkan Athletic Games, which occurred annually. Moreover, he participated in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin (Figure 2), where he met Jesse

Owens. In his diary he describes his emotions as a representative of his country in that memorable event: “For several days I am preparing for the biggest trip of my life” [1]. It’s worth mentioning that the Greek Athletic participation, led by the gold marathon runner Spiros Louis (1872-1940), offered an olive branch to Adolph Hitler.

#### POLITICAL ACTIONS

During the Axis occupation of Greece in the World War II (1941–1944), Lambrakis participated actively in the Greek Resistance [1]. While not a Communist, Lambrakis’s political and ideological orientation did lean left. He was actively involved in the Pacifist Movement of his time [2]. Lambrakis acted politically within the United Democratic Left (EDA), which was the only legal left-wing political party in the country after the Greek Civil War. He was elected to the Hellenic Parliament in the 1961 Greek election, as Piraeus Member of Parliament. The same year, under his initiative, the Committee for International Recession and Peace — CIRP) was established in Greece [2]. As Vice President of CIRP, Lambrakis participated in international pacifist meetings and demonstrations, despite frequent threats against his life. On April 21, 1963, the pacifist movement in Greece organized the First Pacifist Rally from Marathon to Athens [3]. The police intervened, banned the rally and arrested many demonstrators (among them Mikis Theodorakis – the famous composer). However, Lambrakis, protected by his parliamentary identity, marched alone and reached the end of the rally holding the banner with the peace symbol. It was the same banner that he had used in the Aldermaston rally in the United Kingdom while protesting near the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE).

#### MEDICAL CAREER

His scientific work is not known to most doctors, but can be found in the “Roads of Peace,” which published his personal diary [1]. After completing his basic education in Tripoli’s high school, in the central part of Peloponnese, he enrolled for commercial and accounting school in Piraeus. In 1933, he decided to take exams for Medical School of the University of Athens and he was accepted.

Lambrakis excelled in medical studies and he was appreciated by his teachers. On May 30, 1939 he received his medical degree and then became a resident in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Maternity Hospital “Marika Iliadi”, in Athens, Greece [4,5]. During his residency he had three different directors. He started as resident under the distinguished Professor Nikolaos Louros

(1898-1986), then continued under Professor Demetrios Antonopoulos (1899-1998); he finished his residency with Professor Konstantinos Logothetopoulos (1878-1961). Thanks to three leading figures of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Greece, Lambrakis received an excellent medical education, published several articles on Gynecological Endocrinology and completed his medical thesis in 1943, which was titled, “Biochemical research in the blood of quantitative changes of calcium, potassium and glucose during uterine inertia and labor in pregnancy” [Βιοχημικαί έρευναι επί των εν τω αίματι ποσοτικών μεταβολών του ασβεστίου, καλίου και σακχάρου κατά την αδράνεια και τας ωδίνας της εγκύμονος μήτρας] [6]. In November 1947 he was appointed gynecologist for the Public Maternity Hospital in Athens. During that period, Director of the Unit was Professor Georgios Maroudis (?-1950), pioneer in the experimental study of sex hormones; he encouraged Lambrakis to work in the new field of Gynecological Endocrinology. In 1949, Lambrakis published “Diabetes and Pregnancy” [7].

In 1950, Lambrakis was elected Lecturer for the University of Athens and he continued his experimental work in the Laboratories of “Evangelismos” hospital, and in the Hellenic Pasteur Institute [1]. In 1954 he published the first part of his work on Endocrinology and two years later, the second part. His medical career lasted twenty years, from 1939 to 1959. He continued to examine patients as deputy but his experimental work and publications ceased after 1959 [8].

Moreover, the first recording and evaluation of Lambrakis’s scientific work was not done until 25 years after his death—with the initiative of the Hellenic Medical Society in Nuclear and Biochemical Weapons (PIEKPVO) [1]. On behalf of PIEKPVO, the author of this survey - doctor Maria Arvaniti-Sotiropoulou, wrote the biography, “Grigoris Lambrakis: The Pioneer Pacifist Doctor” in 1988 [1]. The president of PIEKPVO Fotis Pavlatos in the book’s preface notes: “Outstanding man, a true scholar and researcher, pioneer and great Pacifist, Grigorios Lambrakis mapped consistently rugged and laborious career in the field of medical science and human society” (Figure 3).

The average man recalls Lambrakis as a famous activist and politician, but does not recognize his medical achievements. Only after hard work and much travail did he complete his specialty and become a gynecologist and obstetrician. He is also viewed as a pioneer in endocrinology in Greece.

Dionysios Ikkos (1921-1993) was a renowned Greek endocrinologist. The first “endocrinologists” appear in Greece in the 1930’s. They were physicians of various specialties who discovered the published articles on endocrine glands from scientists abroad and became interested in this new field. The first Endocrinological Clinic was created by Ikkos



Figure 3: Grigorios Lambrakis at a rally for peace, from Marathon to Athens (21 April 1963).

in 1961 at Evangelismos Hospital; the specialty was recognized in 1964 [9,10]. Lambrakis became a lecturer at the age of 38 during a period that medical school first-class positions were inaccessible or open only to members of medical families and Greek aristocracy. We have performed extensive literature search for his achievements in Gynecologic Endocrinology. Lambrakis had published a large and important scientific opus, including over forty scientific essays and his pioneering “Endocrinology”. Actually, Lambrakis was the Greek pioneer of Gynecological Endocrinology; in fact, he wrote a book of Endocrinology - a whole decade before the specialty was recognized [8]. He showed a special interest in Gynecological Endocrinology, as expressed through his doctoral thesis in 1943 and his thesis for the lectureship in 1949, as well as in multiple publications. He also published a two-volume work on Endocrinology in 1954 and 1956. In reality his “Endocrinology” was to consist of three volumes, but the third volume was not completed because of his assassination. The scientific accuracy and the completeness of the book surprises charmingly, but nonetheless maintains international standards. Such a textbook was novel for its time, because in that era scientific knowledge was transferred only via “notes” written by Professors. The level of his scientific knowledge was very high. Lambrakis was characterized by respect for his mentors. For example, a scientific debate is recorded in the Bulletin of Athens Medical Society between the Professor of Gynaecology in Athens, Nikolaos Louros and Grigorios Lambrakis entitled: “Clinical biocatalytic female genital abnormality” [11].

## A SAMARITAN DOCTOR

During the economic crisis of the Nazi occupation, he founded the “Association of Greek Athlete” which dealt with the care of athletes (or even non-athletes) facing hunger [2]. Thanks to Lambrakis, both a health care system and monitoring system for athletes were organized. Later, he founded a new health organization, TYPA (Health and Welfare Fund Athlete), which supported athletes who were abandoned to their fate by the Greek authorities. During the Greek civil war, Lambrakis worked day and night in the “Elena” Hospital in Athens. He continued to treat the wounded, even when he was ill with jaundice. However, with the retreat of ELAS (a left partisan organization), he was accused of “anti-national activity” and got imprisoned in Goudi Prisons in Athens. Despite this, he opened his private clinic in Athens in August 1949 [1]. Based on his Hippocratic beliefs, he offered free consultation every Wednesday for indigent patients. Meanwhile, every month, he visited the clinic of his uncle K. Tsoukopoulos in Tripoli, where he examined countrymen without charging any fees. Moreover, Lambrakis never accepted money from any athletes. There were cases in which he not only refused payment, but in which he also supported patients financially.

## ASSASSINATION

On May 22, 1963, shortly after he had delivered the keynote speech at an anti-war meeting in Thessaloniki, two far-right extremists, Emannouel



Figure 4: Grigorios Lambrakis after the assassination attempt (22 May 1963).

Emannouilides and Spyros Gotzamanis, while driving a three-wheeled vehicle, struck Lambrakis with a club over the head—in plain view of many witnesses and some police officers [3,12] (Figure 4). He suffered brain injuries and died in the hospital five days later, on May 27. His Professor, Nikolaos Louros said: “The death of Lambrakis is an unimaginable event. Justice must be spoken.” The two assassins were arrested because of a passenger who jumped onto the assassins’ vehicle (Manolis Hatzia Apostolou, nicknamed Tiger). His funeral in Athens became a massive demonstration. More than 500,000 people rallied to protest against

the right-wing government and the Royal Court. The events that followed the assassination of Lambrakis led to rapid political developments [12]. Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis resigned and left for Paris in July 1963. The Marathon Peace Rally became an annual event in Lambrakis's memory. Thousands of Greek youths formed a new political organization called *Lambrakis Youth* whose first secretary was the composer, Mikis Theodorakis [1]. This leftist political organization played a decisive role in Greece's progressive movement of the 1960s. In 1966, a "*Greek Democratic Lambrakis Youth*" was formed in all capitals of the States of Australia by young Greek workers and students. Lambrakis remained in the hearts of the Greek people as a national symbol of democracy. Moreover, the Athens Classic Marathon is run in memory of Grigoris Lambrakis every November.

His work and his performance as lecturer of Obstetrics and Gynaecology have been overlooked, if not overshadowed by his political triumphs. Today Lambrakis is recognized worldwide as a martyr for peace. As recognition for this the World Peace Council conferred upon him its "Gold Medal of Peace" [13].

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#### SAŽETAK

*Grigoris Lambrakis bio je grčki političar, liječnik, sportaš i član Medicinskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Ateni. Kao sportaš, Lambrakis je držao grčki rekord u skoku u dalj tijekom dvadeset i tri godine, a osvojio je i nekoliko zlatnih medalja na Balkanskim atletskim igrama. Imao je izvrsno medicinsko obrazovanje. Kao predavač na Atenskom sveučilištu, Lambrakis je postao pionir ginekološke endokrinologije. U njegovoj se liječničkoj karijeri očitovala njegova dobrohotnost. Također, neprestano je prisustvovao međunarodnim pacifističkim susretima i prosvjedima. Njegova je politička karijera zasjenila njegov medicinski rad i sveučilišni rad predavača opstetricije i ginekologije. Lambrakis je svjetski poznat kao mučenik za mir. Cilj je ovog izlaganja predstaviti njegov život, a posebice pojasniti njegova medicinska postignuća.*

**Ključne riječi:** *Lambrakis; ginekološka endokrinologija; aktivist za mir; ubojstvo; sportaš.*