

merial

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— VALUE BEYOND THE LABEL

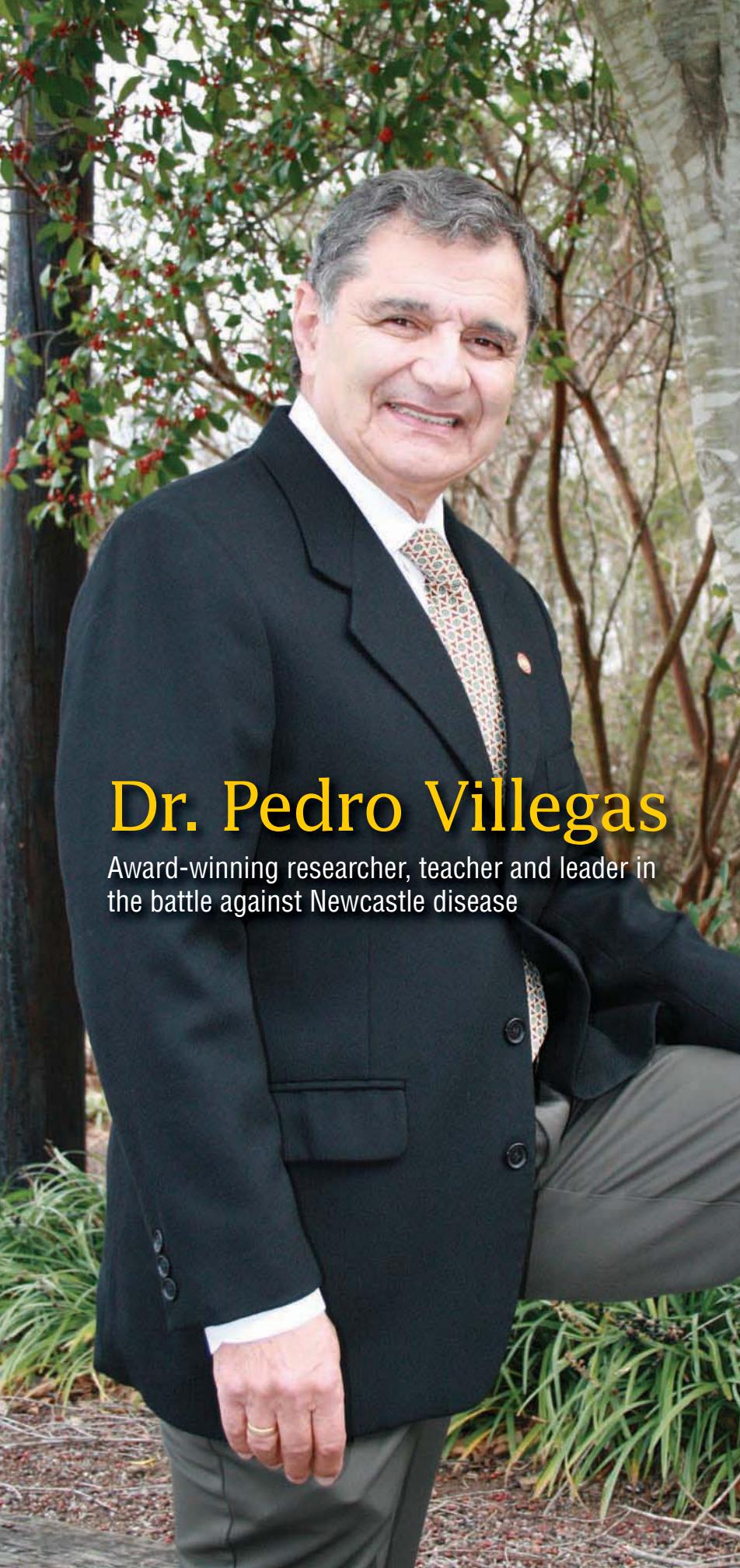
Dr. Pedro Villegas

Award-winning researcher, teacher and leader
in the battle against Newcastle disease

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Keith's Komments





Dr. Pedro Villegas

Award-winning researcher, teacher and leader in the battle against Newcastle disease

Throughout his more than three-decade career, Dr. Pedro Villegas worked in vaccine development, brought his knowledge of poultry medicine to Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries and taught university students.

Dr. Pedro Villegas has had a major impact on the avian medicine world. In his 30+ year career he has helped develop a vaccine for Newcastle disease, been a leader in bringing information about poultry medicine to Latin America and other Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries, and inspired and mentored countless graduate students in the U.S. and around the world.

Humble beginnings

Villegas grew up during the 1950s in the small Colombian town of Líbano, the second of 12 children and the son of a farmer. "As a farmer, my father had all sorts of animals around so it was only natural that I developed an interest in veterinary medicine," Villegas says.

After completing high school, Villegas attended veterinary school at the Universidad del Tolima in Colombia. He earned his M.V.Z.

there, which is the equivalent of a D.V.M. in the U.S. “My father could never afford to send me to vet school, so I worked really hard to be the number one student at the university. That meant I didn’t have to pay tuition,” Villegas says proudly. “To support myself, I taught biology at a private school.”

It was at veterinary school that

with an emphasis in bovine brucellosis, vibriosis and trichomoniasis. “I was really lucky,” Villegas says. “The lab where I worked was very nice, and it was wonderful working with Vera and other U.S. scientists who mentored me and confirmed my decision to work in poultry medicine.

“I was lucky for another reason, too,” Villegas notes. “I met my wife,

“Even though I’d learned a lot of the English language at the vet school in Colombia,” recalls Villegas, “I was totally unprepared for the way people talked in Texas. I remember saying ‘How do you do?’ in my best English, and they would reply ‘Howdy!’ It was real culture shock for someone who had never even been out of Colombia before!”



Villegas has won several awards, including the Special Service Award, the Poultry Research Award and the Lasher-Bottorff Award from the American Association of Avian Pathologists. He has also contributed to nearly 100 peer-reviewed publications.

Villegas realized he wanted to go into poultry medicine. “In veterinary school, I was fortunate to serve as assistant to a very good professor,” Villegas says. “I prepared all his chickens for necropsy at the laboratory, so I was exposed to poultry medicine and knew by my third year that this was where I belonged.”

After graduation, Villegas accepted a position with the Colombian Agricultural Institute in Bogotá. At the ICA he worked in the Veterinary Medicine Research Laboratory for Dr. Ted Vera. Villegas’ responsibilities included diagnostic bacteriology

Angela, at the ICA. She was a microbiologist, and she worked for a professor from Iowa named Dr. Harry Mussman. I always tell people that I won the lottery very early in life when I met my wife,” he says, smiling.

From Colombia to Texas ... and back again

While Villegas was working at the ICA, Vera encouraged him to pursue a scholarship to Texas A&M University for further study. Villegas took his advice and received a Master’s degree in veterinary microbiology from Texas A&M in 1971.

For Villegas, 1971 turned out to be an exceptional year. Not only did he earn his Master’s degree from Texas A&M, but he also became a father for the first time. “Our first son, Pedro, was born just when I was finishing my Master of Science degree,” he says.

After the birth of his son, Villegas and his family returned to Colombia. Villegas briefly took a position as acting head of the Veterinary Microbiology Program for his former employer, the ICA. After only a few months, he was appointed director of the institute’s Diagnosis and



Avian Diseases Program. Throughout much of 1972 he was responsible for providing technical assistance to government-run diagnostic labs throughout Colombia. He was also instrumental in setting up research projects for the institute.

Villegas received his first taste of working with university students during this time. As an ad hoc faculty member of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the National University in Bogotá, Villegas taught a graduate-level course in diagnostic microbiology. The course was part of a cooperative master's program between the University and the ICA.

Next Stop: Athens, Ga.

"My English was much better after my two years in Texas," Villegas says. "As a result, while working for the ICA I had the opportunity to serve as an interpreter for visiting professors and veterinarians from the U.S. who came to Colombia." In fact, it was while Villegas was acting as an interpreter for Dr. Caswell Eidson, a visiting professor from the University of Georgia who came to Colombia to give presentations on the recently discovered Marek's disease vaccine, that he established contact with the Department of Avian Medicine at the University of Georgia. After this contact with Eidson, Villegas later met the man who would change the direction of his life – Dr. Stanley Kleven.

Villegas began pursuing a Ph.D. in medical microbiology at the University of Georgia's College of Veterinary Medicine in 1972. He worked under the direction of Kleven, who contributed tremendously to his education and development as a poultry researcher.

During his early days at the University of Georgia, Villegas says he was also greatly influenced by Eidson, who was starting to make his mark with research on Marek's disease. Villegas would later get the opportunity to work closely with Eidson on preparation and training for a Marek's vaccine at what would become Merial Select in Gainesville, Ga.

Villegas notes that Eidson's early death was a tremendous loss for the department and the poultry industry.

In 1975 Villegas earned his Ph.D., writing his dissertation on the newly evolving technology of spray vaccination. Per the terms of his grant, he returned to Colombia

Villegas grew up and began his career in Colombia, and he has also lived in Texas and Georgia.

to work at ICA, where he was the head of the Veterinary Microbiology department. "I'd just gotten my doctorate, and I saw needs everywhere in my country. I wanted to say 'yes' to everyone," he says. "I was busy doing research, consulting and teaching. My second son, Andrés, was born while we were in Colombia."

Villegas was so busy with his work that when he received a letter from Kleven a year later, he was not prepared for its contents. His mentor was asking him to come back to the University of Georgia and enroll in the department as assistant professor.

Georgia and a vaccine called Avinew

Villegas returned to the University of Georgia's College of Veterinary Medicine in 1977. There, he served in the Department of Avian Medicine with a focus on avian virology. He began doing diagnostic virology in a small lab and organized and taught a graduate-level class in avian virus diseases. He also brought in avian medicine researchers from outside the University of Georgia to share their knowledge and experience with his students.

Villegas' research took a particularly noteworthy turn in the early 1980s when he teamed up with Dr. John Glisson, who is now head of the

Change, The Only Constant

I recently had the opportunity to experience first hand another instance that demonstrated change is the only constant. I had an article already written and ready to be printed in the April edition of Merial Selections talking about the changes that we at Merial Select would be facing in 2011. I was going to discuss the proposed joint venture between Merial and Intervet/Schering-Plough and what my thoughts were about what that would mean for the future. Just before the magazine went to press, we were told that the joint venture had been called off. Instead of talking about



Keith Pritchard,
Executive Director,
US Business
Operations, Avian

the changes we expected, I had to make a last-minute substitution and just make a brief statement that Merial would remain the animal health subsidiary of Sanofi. This showed that the saying "change is the only thing that remains constant" is more apropos than ever.

As Merial's customer, you may be wondering if and how these changes will affect you. I would like to take this opportunity to reassure you that Merial Select remains the same company you have known and done business with for years. Our efforts remain focused on providing you with a reliable supply of quality poultry vaccines and the exceptional customer care to support those vaccines.

While contemplating these events, I took the opportunity to pause and reflect on the many changes Merial Select has gone through over the years. Starting as a local lab producing Marek's vaccines for three poultry companies in northeast Georgia, the company grew into a state-licensed lab in 1979 and then a USDA-licensed lab in 1980. The next major milestone was the acquisition of Select Labs in 1988 by Rhone Poulenc, the predecessor of Sanofi. From there, Select Labs grew with the 1995 acquisition of the US poultry vaccine operations of Sanofi Animal Health and the 1997 acquisition of Central Biologics. These changes meant that Select Labs had manufacturing sites in multiple states with labs in Maryland and North Carolina as well as Georgia. The next big change was the merger of Rhone Poulenc and Merck to form Merial in 1997. Now, Merial has undergone one more change to become the animal health division of Sanofi. All of these changes can be confusing, but I assure you the things that made Merial Select successful will not change.

Many of you may know some or all of these changes, but I would also like to share some others you may not know. For instance, did you know that Merial Select now does business in 55 countries on five continents? Did you know that we have more than 100 different vaccines that are made at the three US manufacturing sites and sold to these countries? Or did you know that today, approximately 70 percent of Merial Select's sales are outside the US? I bring these facts to your attention to illustrate the point that, while some things change and some things remain the same, the core values that make Merial Select the company you have known and trusted for 40 years will not change. The names may change, but what's important remains the same.

The fact that we all face changes remains constant. How we deal with those changes is what is important. The author Bruce Barton said, "When you are through changing, you are through." I assure you; Merial Select is not through changing and is certainly not through. We are committed to using the opportunities that change brings to continue to deliver "Value Beyond the Label."

Hear the interview

[www.wattagnet.com/
merial14.aspx](http://www.wattagnet.com/merial14.aspx)

Department of Population Health at the University of Georgia's College of Veterinary Medicine. The two began working to isolate viruses, particularly rotaviruses, that at the time were a big concern in turkeys.

Villegas isolated several viruses, and he was frustrated that no rotaviruses were identified. However, repeatedly, a particular virus was found in the intestines of turkeys. He then decided to inoculate chickens with the non-pathogenic strain obtained from turkeys. After several research studies, the VG/GA vaccine (named for Drs. Villegas and Glisson) was characterized and proved its efficacy against Newcastle disease. That vaccine is now marketed under the trade name of Avinew and is used all over the world. It has been a tremendous help with saving chickens. Up until then, most Newcastle vaccines were still from the 1940s and early 1950s. Avinew took a new approach to the disease, attacking the virus in the intestinal tract where it multiplies before it goes to the respiratory system.

Pride in his students

When the conversation turns from his research to talking about his former students, Villegas is visibly proud. He can tell you what each of his former graduate students is doing today. "I take pride in my family over anything else," Villegas says, "but next are my students and then my publications. I've had 11 Ph.D. students over the years, as well as more than 20 Masters-level students."

Any conversation with Villegas is punctuated by lively recollections

of time spent with his students. These recollections include racquetball games, cookouts and one memorable softball game – Villegas' first – where he was so excited to get a hit that he ran the wrong way around the bases.

Villegas still stays in touch with his former students. They regularly consult him about their careers and matters relating to the poultry industry. His graduate students have succeeded in the U.S. poultry

cooperation with the Colombian Veterinary Poultry Association. The seminar got its start in Athens in 1983. "That year, my daughter Patricia was born. Who would have thought that more than 20 years later she would be the secretary of the last two international seminars?" Villegas says.

Villegas was looking for a way to transfer knowledge and technology to other parts of the world, especially countries with limited



The VG/GA vaccine, now marketed under the trade name of Avinew, is used all over the world and attacks the Newcastle virus in the intestinal tract before it goes to the respiratory system.

industry, occupying important positions in leading companies in the U.S., as well as engaging in research and teaching positions in various areas. Villegas proudly points out that one of his students took over his lab and teaching responsibilities when he retired.

Latin America outreach

In addition to his work with poultry students, Villegas is also very pleased with the International Seminar in Avian Pathology and Production, which he organized in

resources for poultry health research. "I started early to plan a one-week meeting here for colleagues from Spanish-speaking countries where we would conduct everything in Spanish. We held the first seminar in 1983, then another one in 1986 and then one every four years."

Now, most in the industry refer to the seminar as "Pedro's Seminar." It consists of information sessions and social opportunities for attendees. Classes are conducted all day, and after 5 p.m. other activities are held, such as sports, social

dinners and shopping. "During the shopping session last year the attendees bought every single digital camera Best Buy had in stock," Villegas recalls with a big chuckle.

"We have a final banquet where we honor Latin American professionals who have made important contributions to the profession." The seminar has proven to be popular. In 1983 there were 80 attendees; in 2010 there were 385.

The seminar has had a lasting impact on the industry. "If there's money left from the meeting – and there usually is – we use it for research projects at the Univer-

poultry health program in North America. Numerous other honors and awards populate his career.

Though Villegas has retired from the University of Georgia, he remains active in the poultry industry and currently consults and travels throughout Latin America. As he sees it, the important role the poultry industry plays in the world will grow in the years ahead.

Villegas also says he sees great potential in the industry's future for the use of recombinant vaccines. The *in ovo* technique will be more commonly used in the world, he predicts, and several

After several research studies, the VG/GA vaccine was characterized and proved its efficacy against Newcastle disease. That vaccine is now called Avinew and is used all over the world.

sity of Georgia as well as universities in Colombia and other countries," Villegas says humbly. "We continue to make contributions to developing countries long after the seminar is over."

A lifetime of service

Villegas' contributions to the world of poultry medicine extend well beyond his vaccine for Newcastle disease. His work has appeared in almost 100 peer-reviewed publications. In 2003 he received the Special Service Award from the American Association of Avian Pathologists, and in 2007 he received the AAAP's Poultry Research Award. He also received the AAAP's Lasher-Bottorff Award in 2010 in recognition of his important contributions to the

vaccines or antigens will be applied by this procedure. "The challenge for the vaccine companies will be to establish compatibility for the different products applied in vaccination programs," Villegas says. "When I think of this type of research, it makes me wish I could stay in the game and work on it because it's applied research, and that's what I really like."

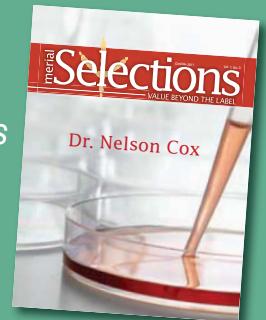
However, Villegas is finding he enjoys retirement too much to think about going back. "The best part is that I don't have to worry about things like budgets, deadlines and all the other pressures," he says. "My wife and I travel some, we now have a grandson and I'm much more relaxed. Now, for me, every day is Saturday!"

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3 EFFECTIVE: Provides broad-spectrum protection against IBD and MD².



4 EASY TO ADMINISTER: Administered in ovo or subcutaneously in the hatchery.



5 CONVENIENT: Single hatchery vaccination eliminates field vaccination.



6 RELIABLE: Highest quality product and support from the leading MD vaccine manufacturer.

¹ Merial Study 05-176MS, data on file

² Merial Studies rBD/MD-04-97, rBD/MD-05-98, rBD/MD-06-98, rBD/MD-07-98, rBD/MD-10-98, rBD/MD-11-98, rBD/MD-12-98, rBD/MD-13-98, rBD/MD-04-99, rBD/MD-05-99, 98.319, data on file



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