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DR. RENE SOTELO

PROFILE



Dr. Sotelo - Salud Masculina (promo): <https://youtu.be/Exwk7c0kv2U>

Dr. Sotelo - Demo Reel: <https://youtu.be/25n1KJAtRnI>

Dr. Sotelo - Interview: <https://youtu.be/GpOAzXFP1Ck>

During the summer of 2014, when Dr. René Sotelo received an invitation to attend a barbecue at the home of famed urologist Dr. Arthur Smith in New York, he never imagined that he was facing an important turning point in his life and career. Because, at the age of 52, Dr. Sotelo was already considered an authority in urology, being a pioneer and international leader in robotic and laparoscopic surgery.

However, this Venezuelan physician –dedicated to practicing, developing and promoting advanced robotic surgery techniques not only in Venezuela but also in other Latin American countries– was there, in front of Dr. Smith, listening to an amazing work proposal. Thus, in the midst of that festive atmosphere, Dr. Sotelo saw a door opening to new horizons: he had the possibility of practicing in the United States without having to complete the studies to revalidate his degree. Due to his excellent credentials, the New York State Medical Board could grant him a license to work. It was a real and feasible option.

But Dr. Sotelo –who years earlier had successfully founded the Center for Robotic and Minimally Invasive Surgery in Caracas, enjoying enormous international prestige– had no plans to leave his country in spite of the difficulties it was going through. So, the striking New York proposal became for him only an interesting conversation. At the time, he did not suspect that a week after attending the barbecue, he would receive a definite call. This time it was Dr. Inderbir Gill, chief of Urology at the University of Southern California (USC), whom Dr. Sotelo had met years earlier in Cleveland, where he was traveling to learn laparoscopic surgery.

Dr. Gill cut to the chase: "We know that you have a proposal from New York and that you are coming to the United States to work. And, if you are willing to come, we at USC would also like to make you an offer to work here". From that moment on, everything went very fast. USC made him an offer of working conditions and benefits that Dr. Sotelo could not refuse.

Thus, Dr. Rene Sotelo became the second physician, so far, to obtain this special permission from the Medical Board of California to practice at the USC hospital. The first one was granted, long before, to a Japanese ultrasound specialist who later returned to his country to work at the University of Kyoto. This is an option that exists in the United States so that hospitals attached to universities can bring in talent they require that is not available in the state that claims them. USC claimed Dr. Sotelo and today he is the only one who has such privilege in that prestigious university located in Los Angeles.



A new life, a new challenge

A year after Dr. Gill's proposal –and after going through the rigorous scrutiny of his credentials by the Medical Board of California– in August 2015, Dr. Sotelo traveled to the United States to start a new life in every sense. Together with his wife Patricia and their three children, the celebrated urologist not only began another professional stage but also started an immigrant journey that, despite the exceptional situation he enjoyed, confronted him with numerous challenges.

"When I arrived and started working, I realized that it was much more difficult than I had imagined, because I had not studied medicine in the United States. Therefore, I didn't know about the management of electronic medical records in this country, nor did I know about the medical system, nor Medicare, nor Medicaid; I had no idea about the different types of medical insurance, the laws, the regulations, the informed consents for any surgery. And, in addition, I arrived at a hospital where I didn't know anyone", recalls Dr. Sotelo now, six years after setting out on this new path.



He, who did not need a business card in many other countries, knew immediately that in the United States he had to start from scratch to make his skills known among physicians and patients. "There are always patients for everyone, but, at first, they didn't come to see me. Why would they see a newly arrived Venezuelan doctor when there is another one who does the same thing and is head of the department? On the other hand, it takes time for the other doctors to get to know you; it takes time for the anesthesiologists to realize, when they see you operating, that you are good, that you are not complicated, that you are fast, that you are predictable, that you always do things within a certain period of time", explains Dr. Sotelo.

Since his arrival, he spent a period of three years to make himself known and respected. He remembers it as a learning process that included a period of depression. This is how he relates it: "In Venezuela I had my group of doctors in other specialties to whom I sent my patients, because I knew they were good, serious doctors. Here I had no idea who was good and who was not. It was a learning process that took two or three years. And of course, that led to depression because, obviously, you get depressed to see that you are no longer the star, and you are now in a country where you are just one more. But when I got home and saw my children studying at a high academic level, that gave me the strength to continue. On the other hand, when I was operating, they gave me what I wanted, the latest robot, the tweezers I wanted; there were no material limits, I could do whatever I wanted. Accustomed to so many limitations in Venezuela, it seemed

incredible to me that I could have anything I wanted. It was as if they were telling you: come into this store and take all the candy you want; there are no limits".

For Dr. Sotelo, during those anxious times, the real pleasure was operating. "I didn't have to talk to anyone, I didn't have to write or speak in English; I simply operated, and everyone was watching what I was doing. When I got out of the robot and had to start legally dictating the operative note, going out to legally talk to the relatives, with all the care possible, thinking, 'what am I going to say, what am I not going to say, I have to be careful not to leave out something that they might later say I didn't say', it was very stressful. In the beginning I was very stressed about what I did or didn't write in the stories. Now it's routine", he says, relieved.



It was also a relief for him to successfully complete this stage of networking and self-promotion in order to achieve a network of reliable physicians to whom he could refer patients and who could refer patients to him. Because, in parallel, he had to demonstrate that he was living up to the high standards by which he was being measured due to his status as a full professor, the top tier of the university ladder. "There were only three full professors in the department, the rest were assistant or associate professors. It was necessary for me to demonstrate why I had reached that last level. I had to demonstrate it in scientific discussions, in case meetings. Giving that academic level meant a lot of work and a lot of stress. I could not make a mistake, I had to be very careful not to make a medical-legal mistake because, in addition, I had a permit and an immigration status," recalls Sotelo.

And, as part of the established rules, every year in January he must render accounts: how many publications he has published, how many patents, how many conferences he has been invited to and how many patients he has operated on. It is a record that determines the employment status of each physician. Dr. Sotelo explains: "In Venezuela, I published because I wanted to. Here all the professors are competing. It is known how much each one published, how many prizes each one won, how many invitations to congresses, etc. All this generates academic competition in the hospital where you are competing and also outside the hospital".

Today, Dr. Sotelo is respected and recognized by medical profession, inside and outside the university, as an eminence in his specialty. He has established himself as a researcher and has published more than 60 journal articles, four textbooks and 68 book chapters. His extensive work has been recognized with 34 international awards from scientific and governmental associations. And his passion for education is reflected in more than 86 physicians from different countries that he has trained in robotic techniques.

On the other hand, Dr. Sotelo has been invited to give master lectures at postgraduate and subspecialty levels; and has performed surgeries in hospitals and universities of the public and private sector in more than 22 countries, such as Germany, Italy, Costa Rica,

Turkey, Egypt, Switzerland, Brazil, Colombia, Curacao, Kuwait, Mexico, Ecuador, Korea, India, Qatar, Nicaragua, among others.

His patients include numerous international celebrities from the artistic world, many of them Hollywood actors, who come to consult with him at USC. This prompted the university to ask him to join a committee, along with other physicians who see international patients. In time, he was appointed Medical Director of the Department of International Medicine at USC. Likewise, Spanish-speaking television channels such as CNN and Telemundo ask him for his opinion when there is a figure with a urological issue, as happened recently with former President Bill Clinton.

With such professional solvency, it is not surprising, then, that the Medical Board of California has renewed his work permit without any problem, during the six years he has been at USC.

From Bird Dissection to Robotic Surgery



Although it is true that practicing in the United States was not in Dr. René Sotelo's plans when he lived in Venezuela, it is also true that at the age of 13 he already knew that medicine was his passion. He felt like a surgeon when, in his high school laboratory, he dissected birds or crickets. He liked to wear the white lab coat during the entire school day, including his visits to the library. His classmates from that time say that he felt like a doctor since he was a little boy. And he confirms: "I always wanted to be a doctor".

And when he finally began his medical studies in Caracas, he discovered his passion for urology during the time he spent in a urologist's office to meet a girl he was attracted to, who worked there. What started with a romantic motivation, ended up showing him the path he would follow in his profession. Dr. Sotelo remembers it with enthusiasm: "I learned to do many things in that office. I would go in the afternoons and do the urography of elimination, I did radiology studies; instead of an X-Ray technician, I was the one who developed the films.

I helped the doctor in the office, and at the end of the consultation, he would give me some money. I learned many things about urology in that process. Later I went to help

another urologist at *Clínica La Floresta*. I would sit next to him and watch him go through the consultation. I learned by watching them.

Later, when he was already practicing his profession as a urologist, he began to perform laparoscopic surgery, which existed in Venezuela at that time. However, no one was doing advanced laparoscopic surgery for urology. "And then I came to the United States to learn at the Cleveland Clinic, in Ohio. It was there that I learned, but I did it just by watching what they were doing. I couldn't operate because I didn't have permission to operate in the United States. I was only going there to observe. I observed the operations in Cleveland and returned to Venezuela. Then, in Venezuela, I would practice what I had seen in Cleveland. And little by little, I was self-formed. What I saw I reproduced. Afterwards, I would go back to Cleveland and tell them: "Look at my video, this is what I did". There came a time when the doctors in Cleveland began to see that I was doing new things, things that they were not doing. And I also started publishing about techniques that I was implementing. It was then that Cleveland realized that we could make a tremendous alliance; that we had interesting potentials. And they started coming to Venezuela to see me operate and to do new things with new techniques that, for regulatory reasons, were easier to do there than in the United States. So, we started joint research and developed techniques between Cleveland and ourselves", says Sotelo.

In time, the robot made in the United States arrived in Venezuela, the first Latin American country to have it. Dr. Sotelo recalls: "I was already so skilled in laparoscopy that, for me, what the robot did was to facilitate everything I had done by laparoscopy. So, I described again the techniques that I had described by laparoscopy; I described them again with a robot. And I began to do many things that the robot allowed me to do that I could not do by laparoscopy. Then, 14 or 15 years ago, I performed the first robotic surgeries in Brazil, in the two most important hospitals; I was taken by helicopter from one hospital to another. And I also performed the first robotic kidney surgeries in Colombia".

His extraordinary skill with the robot also allowed him to revalidate his studies in Colombia, where he obtained his license and practiced the profession for a long time. However, he never considered that country for permanent work. Otherwise, Mexico loomed as a possible option for Dr. Sotelo, in case of emigration, not only from a professional but also from an emotional point of view.

Mexican blood runs through his veins. His father, born in Mexico, went to Venezuela at a very young age to work. Dr. Sotelo himself recalls: "He met my mother there. She was Venezuelan, from Mérida. When he had been working in Venezuela for about three months, he told her: "I'm going back to Mexico or we'll get married". And they decided to get married. My dad was in Venezuela all his life. He worked in lithography, in graphic arts; and she taught in schools, and later she



worked in a university college where she became principal. My mom learned to cook Mexican food and we always ate it. We also went to Mexico several times with my dad".

It was not long after he specialized in the new techniques as a urologist when, from Mexico, he began to be invited to operate and give lectures in that country; and he, in turn, received Mexican doctors to train them at the robotic surgery center in Venezuela. "The Mexican doctors I had trained invited me to visit them to operate. Afterwards, I took care of obtaining my revalidation of my medical and urologist degree in that country. And today I have all the legal papers like any Mexican urologist, and I am endorsed by the Mexican board of urology to practice there". In addition, as the son of a Mexican, Dr. Sotelo has the nationality and passport of that country.

Not surprisingly, he was invited to participate in an initiative of a group of Mexican women doctors who chose 12 physicians to narrate their successes and failures in a book entitled "*Doctores con Alas: 12 Historias de Médicos Migrantes*" (Doctors with Wings: 12 Stories of Migrant Doctors). Dr. Sotelo's story is captured in these pages where he not only talks about his experience migrating to the United States, but also gives eight important recommendations to young doctors who want to work abroad.

Among these recommendations, Dr. Sotelo highlights some of them: "Learn another language and have the discipline in the collection of medical data to be able to publish in the long term. Understand that publications are not made immediately but accumulate. If you are systematic in collecting data, in ten or 20 years you will be able to publish. Nobody publishes discoveries until you have many years of accumulated experience. I also recommend investing in learning statistics, learning technological tools that are key today, such as artificial intelligence, things that are going to be the future of medicine; genetics, immunotherapy".

And there is something he considers fundamental: "Don't work thinking about what you're going to do in 20 years. Just enjoy the road, enjoy the route. You never know where that road is going to take you. If you do it in a disciplined way and accumulate experiences, it will lead you to a path of success. But it's important to enjoy the road, enjoy the journey.



A maker of ideas

This 59-year-old man, simple and warm, gifted with innate sympathy and a way with words, exudes the confidence that every patient looks for in a doctor. Dr. René Sotelo's high professional level is organically molded to his sensitivity and empathy with others. This can be clearly seen in his social networks, where he receives numerous messages of affection and gratitude.

This is because Dr. Sotelo has been able to use digital communication to disseminate information and recommendations on urological issues in a clear, instructive and entertaining way. He has also presented videos of conversations he has with physicians from other specialties, where they discuss health issues that concern everyone.

Precisely those conversations have inspired him to work on a project -with the help of Uno Productions- to produce digital content for television and social networks. Dr. Sotelo is enthusiastic about this idea, which he will soon make widely known: "We are already working; we are recording, doing photo shoots.

Previously, in my networks, I was interviewing physicians from other specialties. I moderated the discussion through a patient's story; it was like a discussion among colleagues, which on Instagram was called *Entre Amigos*".

This will be a new opportunity not only to demonstrate Dr. Sotelo's capabilities, but also to give free rein to another of his passions: educating to raise awareness. "I'm always creating, I'm always inventing something. Sometimes I'm afraid of the things I want to do, because I know that when I put them in my head, I do them. I already got into this new adventure".

On the other hand, with that spirit of seeing what he sets out to do come true, Dr. Sotelo decided to study a postgraduate degree in marketing, which he will start at the beginning of 2022. "I have always wanted to have a little more training in the subject of communication, which I have handled empirically. And more so now that I am going to do the television program. I want to have a university education in the whole topic of digital communication, to understand more the intelligence behind marketing. And *Annenberg School of Communication*, which belongs to USC, offers this two-year postgraduate program that I will start in early January", he says.



Only his focus and perseverance allow him to distribute his time to meet the demands of his profession in addition to many other activities, being the head of a household that he enjoys with his wife Patricia and their three children: Andrea, who is studying law at Berkeley; Daniela, a Biomedical Engineering student at USC; and little Rene, who is in high school.

His days start at 4:30 am to attend tele-consultations of his patients in Venezuela, or case consultations with the urologists who work with him in Caracas, where he travels every two months. At the USC hospital, he works every day starting at 7:30 am. Three and a half days a week he performs operations and the rest he devotes to consultations. And, he confesses, "When I'm operating, I'm relaxed". But he also has to dedicate time to study, to read medical journals to update himself, and to zoom or face-to-face conferences. "Usually, by 5 or 6 pm I'm already at home. I go to bed very early. Although, I usually have activities in the evening. But I try to be in bed before 10 pm."

Undoubtedly, Dr. René Sotelo is a doer, a man who is permanently focused on what he wants. "People know me for that: I do what I say I'm going to do. I simply set goals that may be large but are achievable. They may be complex, but they are realistic, and I achieve them. I don't think there's anything I've wanted to do that I haven't done".



Men's Health Campaign



In his eagerness to seek formulas that help raise awareness about men's health care, Dr. René Sotelo will soon launch the "Men's Health" campaign through social networks, with the aim of being shared by Spanish-speaking television channels. Dr. Sotelo himself explains it this way:

"I have dedicated many years to educating physicians. And today I think we should spend more time educating patients. Sometime ago, I wrote a book on urological topics dedicated to patients, entitled "Don't be afraid of the finger".

Now, formally, I'm doing a men's health education campaign. We are generating content that is being recorded by athletes, musicians, actors and different celebrities. They are going to be in videos giving messages about the need to check your prostate: "Touch your testicles."

It's a lot of what has been done for breast cancer, but what has not been done for men.

We are campaigning for men's health. Today there are 19 influencers who have already recorded, of which 15 or 17 are patients of mine. Because I started this project by asking my patients, when they came to my office, to record a text about the campaign. It is a campaign for the Spanish-speaking world, so it is going to be entirely in Spanish".

He, personally, is the promoter and has the support of personalities such as Gustavo Dudamel, conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; the Mexican actor Eugenio Derbez; the Venezuelans Oscar de León, José Luis Rodríguez, Edgar Ramírez; the Colombians Carlos Vives, Juan Pablo Raba; the Brazilian actor Wagner Moura and other celebrities from all Latin America.

"Among the topics they touch on are the importance of hygiene, the importance of retracting the foreskin, the warning signs for penile cancer, when is the right age to check the prostate, how to examine the testicles, when the testicle gives a warning sign. They talk about these topics according to their personalities and ages. The campaign will be disseminated on social networks and we hope that the television channels will also help us in its dissemination," says Dr. Sotelo, who explains the objective of this campaign that will provide very precise information to men:

"There is a responsibility to raise awareness. There is no reason for people like James Michael Tyler, actor of the TV series *Friends*, to die of prostate cancer at the age of 59.

He was diagnosed at the age of 55. Why? That should have been diagnosed at 50 and he would probably be alive today. When prostate cancer is diagnosed early, you survive 99% of the time. So, with this there is an issue of education, of misinformation. There is an issue of machismo, but there is also an issue of the need to educate and motivate. If people are properly informed, if it is explained to them what they have to do, they do it. There is no reason for a man to die of prostate cancer today; it is absurd to have to amputate a penis for penile cancer. In the United States, penile cancer cases are twice as high in Latinos as in Americans. This has to do with hygienic habits, with going to the doctor at the right time and, above all, with education. We have to explain to them that they should go to the doctor at any sign of alarm. We have studied that most of these patients do not go to the doctor, not because they do not have insurance, but because they are working and are not aware of the importance of going to the doctor. Therefore, we have to educate them so that they know the importance of this issue."

