

# Argentina's First Lady of Cardiology

Dr. Liliana Grinfeld, a prominent cardiologist at the Italian Hospital in Buenos Aires, has three great passions: her children, medicine, and her country – Argentina. In both her personal and professional life, it's the heart that counts. With *Medical Solutions*, she talked about her journey from medical student to groundbreaking pioneer in her chosen field.

By Bill Hinchberger

"I thought my father was going to kill me," Liliana Grinfeld recalls with a chuckle, explaining how proud he had been back in the 1970s when his cardiologist daughter latched on to the famous Cleveland Clinic, and how devastated he was when she decided to come back to her home country to practice.

Today, Grinfeld is one of Argentina's leading cardiologists. After returning to Argentina, the budding heart specialist would join René Favaloro, the legendary "father of the bypass." Favaloro had also left the Cleveland Clinic and a lucrative practice in North America to return to his native South America. Grinfeld and Favaloro shared a hometown, La Plata, a mid-sized city about 60 kilometers (ca. 37 miles) south of Buenos Aires. As a friend of her physician father, the celebrated Favaloro would frequent her family home when she was a girl.

Favaloro's dream was to ensure for his countrymen the same quality of health-care that he had helped develop in the United States. He established a foundation and a medical practice to pursue that goal. Grinfeld became part of the team. Soon, she would become a star in her own right – every bit the pioneer in the spirit of Favaloro.

Chief of the Hemodynamics and Interventionist Cardiology Service at a marquee Buenos Aires institution – the Italian Hospital – and also President of the Cardiological Society, Grinfeld has chalked up a litany of firsts. She was the country's first hemodynamic cardiologist. She performed the country's first coronary angioplasty, and was the first physician there to place a stent. She was the first and only female president of both the Interventionist Cardiologists Association and the Argentinean Cardiology Foundation. In her spare time, she performs clinical research, and together with her cardiologist brother, she is developing a new ostium stent. But when asked to name her most satisfying accomplishment, she hardly bats an eye before answering, "being the mother of my two children." If family comes first, medicine can't be far behind. Indeed, family ties led Grinfeld into medicine in the first place. "My father was a passionate physician," she recalls, "and my personality is very much like his. I never tire, and I love medicine."

But her father, a vascular surgeon, tried to discourage her from becoming a doctor. "He said that for a woman who wants to have a family, it is very difficult to have a successful career," she says. Following

**"My father was a passionate physician, and my personality is very much like his. I never tire, and I love medicine."**

Liliana Grinfeld, MD, Chief of Hemodynamics and Interventionist Cardiology Service, Italian Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina



**“I think we need more science and more art. More science and more experience. You need to do angioplasties. That’s the art of medicine.”**

Liliana Grinfeld, MD, Chief of Hemodynamics and Interventionist Cardiology Service, Italian Hospital, Buenos Aires, Argentina

dad’s advice, Grinfeld initially decided to major in philosophy – but that lasted only a few months until her mother encouraged her to pursue her obvious calling. While she has certainly managed a successful career, Grinfeld admits that her father was right – at least in part. She often felt torn when leaving home to attend to patients. “When your child is sick and you have an angioplasty scheduled, you have to come in,” she said. “Your child is going to be okay. You know that.”

Grinfeld cites help from family and ultimately, the ability to hire a nanny as factors that favored her career when her children were young. But she still sees evidence of double duty among working mothers at the hospital. “When their kids get out of school, they come here,” she

says. “They do their homework or whatever until their mothers are ready to go home.” A soon-to-be-released survey by the Argentinean Cardiology Foundation finds evidence of continued gender discrimination in hiring and salaries, notes Grinfeld.

### **Back to the Roots**

The United States has its own glass ceiling, so it wasn’t a quest for equality that sent Grinfeld to Ohio – and the prestigious Cleveland Clinic – in the early 1970s. It was her father. “My father said, ‘You need to go to the States. The residencies in coronary and angiography here are no good,’” she recalls. “Those were probably some of the most wonderful times of my life. We worked like dogs, but I loved it. I was learning every day.”

Finishing her residency, Grinfeld stayed on part-time at the Cleveland Clinic – and she began building a reputation. “My father used to say that in Argentina, I was known as his daughter, but that in the United States he was known as my father,” she says smiling.

Soon Grinfeld received what she called “an excellent offer” to sign on full-time in Cleveland, but Argentina and Favaloro spoke more forcefully. That’s when her rightfully proud father did a double-take. “I like my country,” Grinfeld explains. “If you ask me where I want to live, I will tell you here: Buenos Aires, Argentina. I understand that there are other places that offer more professional opportunities, and that are safer.” But, Grinfeld, like Favaloro, preferred her roots over life as a brain-drain expatriate. Taking the

concept even further, Grinfeld spends two days a week in her hometown La Plata attending to a private practice and working as a consultant for the Ministry of Health.

Yet, the Cleveland Clinic experience would stay with Grinfeld for the rest of her life. "I think that after going to a center of such high quality, you keep it in your blood, in your soul," she says. "You always strive to reach that level."

Back in Argentina, Grinfeld began breaking down barriers. Perhaps the scariest was performing the country's first angioplasty together with Dr. Jorge Belardi in the early 1980s. "We were in panic," she recalls. "We kept calling each other on the phone the night before. I remember that we could inflate the balloon for eight seconds – that was the limit."

### Striving to Be the Best

Research has presented a particular challenge in Argentina. "In Argentina, resources are scarce, and the process to get them is very involved," she notes. "If you are a full-time investigator, you have time for that. But that is not my case. In the United States, at Harvard and many other places, they will give you time for research and they will pay you extra. Here, we have time, but we are our own sponsors. Hopefully, we will wake up one day to find that this has changed."

Grinfeld is part of a group of physicians who presented a genetic study of 100 angioplasty cases at the European Congress of Cardiology 2009; they funded the study themselves.

The status of Argentinean medicine may sometimes be difficult, but it is hardly desperate. Thanks to the efforts of people like Favalaro and successors like Grinfeld, Argentinean medical education has come a long way since the days when Dr. Grinfeld's daughter had to leave the country to find a quality residency. For example, the Italian Hospital has an agreement with the University of Buenos Aires, which in turn, has struck a deal with the Argentinean Society of Cardiology, to train young physicians.

Symbolized by its acquisition of top-of-the-line equipment like the Artis zee®



Dr. Liliana Grinfeld has a worldwide reputation as a cardiologist and has reached many "female firsts" in Argentina.

interventional imaging system from Siemens, the Italian Hospital has become a regional, if not an international, center of excellence. "I always say that the Italian Hospital is the Cleveland Clinic of South America because we try to do the best," says Grinfeld. "We try to maintain the best level in terms of academics, scientific research, patient care – everything."

The Cleveland Clinic and Dr. Mason Sones also helped Grinfeld develop a level-headed philosophy of medical practice. Besides Favalaro, her mentors included the equally eminent Dr. William L. Proudfoot, who taught Grinfeld a lesson that she will never forget. "He always told me, 'If what you read does not match your experience, don't believe what you read,'" she says. "In the papers you can see a lot of things, but experience is key." With the better images and the maximized dose reduction provided by the Artis zee, Grinfeld can now more fully adopt this philosophy.

Experience also provides the foundation for Grinfeld's philosophy as a physician. Her office is decorated with works painted by a stepson, who now lives and works in Rome – thus, inviting questions about art. As it turns out, she once became entangled in a debate with a formidable Argentinean cardiologist who argued that the profession needed less art and more science. She says she replied, "I think we need more science and more art. More science and more experience. You need to do angioplasties. That's the art of medicine."

She continues: "You also have to interact with your patients. It is an art of the heart, of the emotions, to keep your patients comfortable – even when there is nothing you can do for them. People at the end of their lives – not only in my specialty, but in others. Those with cancer, for example."

Grinfeld admits that she loses sleep over setbacks: "We have patients who come here, and their hearts have stopped. You go and work two hours and the patient dies. That makes you feel very bad. I can never get over it. Not only when a patient dies, but also when you are supposed to open an artery and you cannot. You ask yourself: What did I do wrong? When you cannot open an artery, it is already written that the patient is going to die." But the realm of possibility, the artistic side, provides hope. "That's why medicine is still an interesting career," she says. "Because it is not an exact science. There is a lot of art."

*A former correspondent in South America for The Financial Times and Business Week, Bill Hinchberger is a writer who divides his time between São Paulo, Brazil, and Marseille, France. He has contributed to publications like The Lancet and Science, and reported for the Medical Education Network Canada.*

### Further Information

[www.siemens.com/angiography](http://www.siemens.com/angiography)