

Dr Constantinos Frantzides of the University of Chicago

A pioneer of awesome medical technology

PROFILE

By David Fisher

REMEMBER Churchill's famous comment about Clement Attlee — that he was "a modest man with much to be modest about"? Well, the opposite might apply to Dr Constantinos Frantzides. He's an immodest man, certainly; then again, he has much to be immodest about.

He was born 49 years ago in Limassol, the son of a carpenter and a part-time seamstress; he is currently Chairman of the Division of Surgery at the University of Chicago, "probably one of the ten best universities on the planet". He's also one of the world's foremost practitioners in the field of laparoscopic surgery, a state-of-the-art technique presaging the shape of surgical medi-

the Minimally Invasive Surgery Centre, where I am the Director, there is no operation other than a liver transplant that we don't do laparoscopically."

So what's the difference? Well, primarily that you operate without actually cutting the patient — or at least, by cutting him as little as possible. Instead of long, six-inch incisions, explains Constantinos, each operation involves three or four tiny punctures, about 5-10mm in length.

Through these he then inserts hollow metal tubes called trocars, each containing a surgical instrument (one of these instruments being the laparoscope). Then, on a TV monitor connected via computer to a camera in the laparoscope, the surgeon can see what's going on inside the patient's abdomen — and, by wearing a 'data glove' and moving his hands accordingly, he can move the instruments around, thereby carrying out the operation.

Once the instruments are in place, in fact, the surgeon's role is uncannily similar to playing a video game — which is why Constantinos believes the 'Nintendo generation', who've grown up with this kind of hand-eye co-ordination, will take to the system far more easily than members of his own generation have done (he's given up playing his 12-year-old son at video games; he admits with a laugh: the kid's impossible to beat). Which is not to say laparoscopic techniques haven't made an impact — even in Cyprus, the vast majority of clinics and hospitals now have the equipment for all but the most advanced minimally invasive operations; but it's also true that, within the older generation of medics, there have been significant pockets of opposition to their adoption.

"Some people have vision, and can see how the future will be formed," says Constantinos, "and some people don't. It has nothing to do with how clever you are — usually in fact, very clever people don't have much vision, because they're more of the square-thinking kind of people. If you don't let your imagination wander and run free a little, and you always use logic to understand the future, you may not see the future."

Imagination is important to Constantinos; he considers himself an artist, he says only half-jokingly, and is in fact a keen Sunday painter ("usually

there are ceiling-mounted monitors and equipment, plus turn dials or press buttons; he just says, "Hermes. Insufflator. Activate" — and it's done.

All of which sounds both amazing and a little alarming — you can see why those reared on traditional methods should have raised objections. What happens, for example, if the robotic arm or the laparoscope (or even Hermes) breaks down half way through an operation? "What happens if I have a heart attack half way through an operation?" he shoots back. Replacements, in both cases, take over — the equipment isn't too expensive by the standards of medical technology, he insists (a complete laparoscopy set costs around £15-20,000; it should always be possible to have a back-up, in the unlikely event of anything going wrong. As for Hermes, there's always the option of disconnecting the entire system and doing it manually.

Well of course, you're thinking, he would say that yet there's definitely something reassuring about Constantinos. Partly, no doubt, it's a question of bedside manner, a doctor's way of putting you at ease — but there's also a direct, unaffected air about him, this smallish man with greying beard and crinkly, clever eyes.

A touch of cold-bloodedness clings to him, as it does to all doctors — when he talks of "complications" you know he means dead people — yet he does genuinely seem to prize honesty: "American medicine is more humane," he says. "I'm probably touching on a politically incorrect issue here, but in Cyprus we still don't tell patients what their ailment is: they suffer from cancer, they die and they don't even know what they die from. I feel the person should know what he or she is suffering from — and live their life any way they want to, knowing the prognosis."

When I'm either very happy or very depressed", Surgery too is an art, and he delegates as many administrative duties as he can so as to make time for it — treating it not as a job but an ongoing challenge, a journey to the far-flung frontiers of technology.

Take, for instance, his operating theatre in Chicago: it is, he

says proudly, "one of a kind — there is nothing on planet Earth like my operating-room at this point in time". It's closer to science fiction than conventional medicine, an 'endo-suite' specifically designed for minimally invasive surgery.

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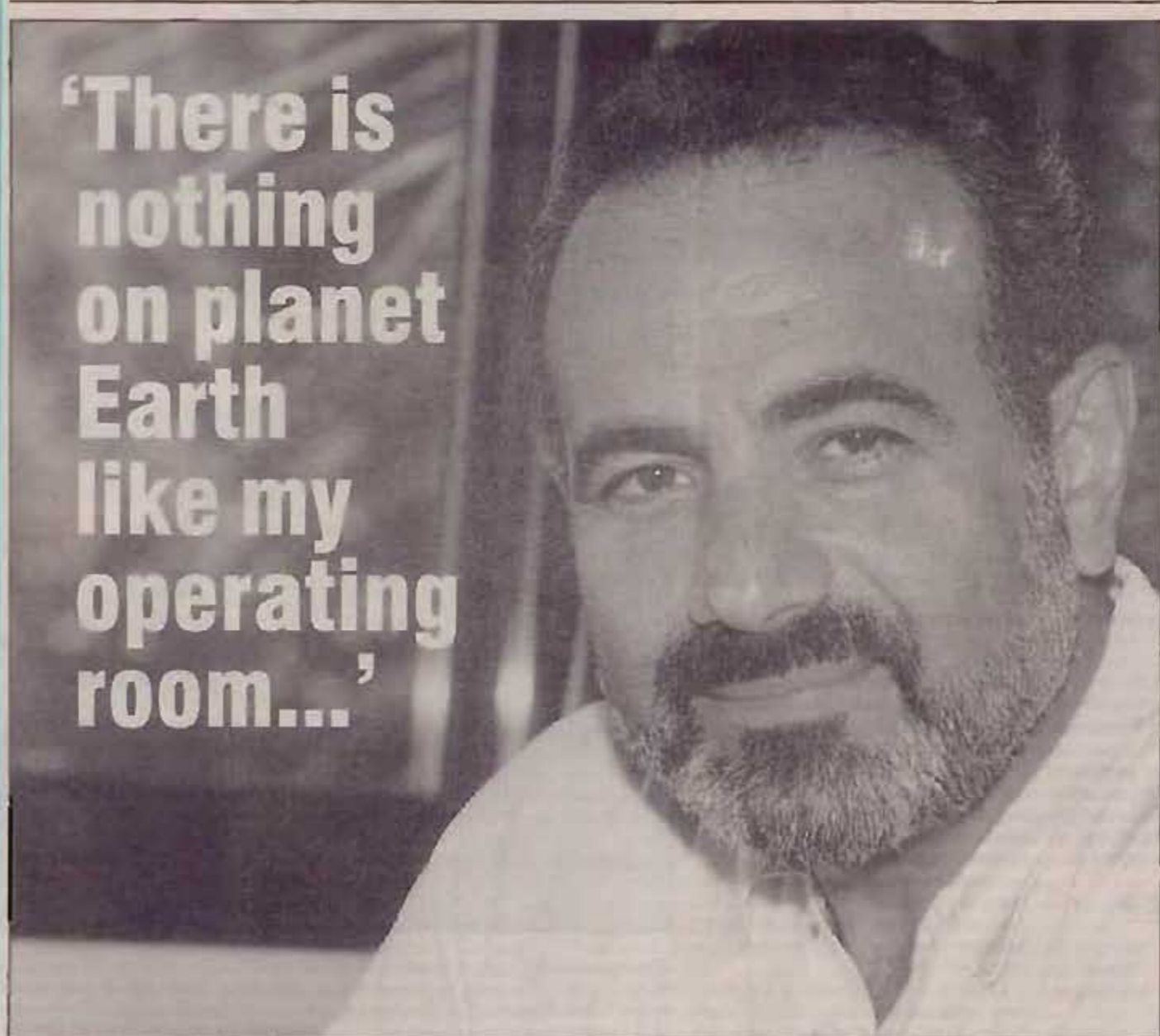
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'More Cypriot than the Cypriots'

(Photo: Christos Theodorides)

he's no mindless cheerleader for the American Way. Nowhere else, he admits, could someone so obviously a foreigner this English remains heavily accented) become the Head of such a prestigious institution; he feels accepted there in a way he never did, for instance, working in the UK. Yet he feels, he says — perhaps with a touch of irony — "more Cypriot than the Cypriots"; he visits many times a year, always glad to "come back to my roots"; and, for all his futuristic zeal, he still retains a touch of Old World fatalism.

"I think some aspects of the patient-doctor relationship are better in Greece and Cyprus," he begins carefully. "There is more understanding of Nature itself. In this culture, we know that Death is inevitable, and if we die it's not always because somebody's responsible for our death. Whereas the philosophy in the US is that we're a big country, we have everything, so we can prolong life — we can do anything to prolong life. Death is an

option — I want to die or I don't want to die. But of course it's not an option."

This, in the end — the layer of old-fashioned common sense beneath the brave new world tub-thumping — is perhaps why Constantinos comes across so persuasively. After all, it's not the details of minimally invasive surgery one may object to — as he says, it's no different to an aeroplane flying on auto-pilot, with the pilot himself ready to step in should anything go wrong; it's not so much the practical application but the principle itself, the notion of hands-off surgery, that's a little worrying. Can we trust this new fangled system? Constantinos, with his air of steadiness and certitude — even with his disdain of any false modesty — suggests that we can.

Which is just as well — because, like it or not, surgery-by-technology is coming anyway. Not necessarily because of the many advantages Constantinos enumerates — not because it does away with big in-

fections, ugly scars, risks of infection, post-operation paralysis of the bowel, feeding-by-IV: all this is fine; but it's not the reason why money is currently being poured into research and development.

The reason, quite simply, is this: laparoscopy, with its tiny punctures, means that patients can go home the same day. How profitable is that? In the US, per day per patient in the US, operated on the traditional way, patients invariably need a week or so in hospital just to recover; using minimally invasive surgery, hospitals can save many thousands of dollars. The rest, as they say, is academic.

This, then, is the shape of things to come. His operating theatre, says Constantinos, is but "the first step to what we call 'remote controlled operations'. Eventually what's going to happen is we're going to create the ultimate virtual sterile environment. What contaminates the operating-room are the people going into it — so the vision is to

have an operating-room where only the patient goes in. And there's going to be robotic arms connected to a computer through data gloves, and the surgeon is going to be outside the operating-room and, wearing these gloves, will be able to manipulate the arms for a much more precise operation. In addition, you'll be able to rehearse the operation — you'll be able to simulate it, with the information you can get into the computer. Using a virtual patient."

Virtual surgeons, virtual patients, robotic arms... Sobering to realise — if, like me, you've always thought of medicine as the most personal, the most intimate of professions — how quickly and completely technology is overtaking the old verities. Rather heartening, however, to remember that a carpenter's son from Limassol is among the pioneers of this awesome new technology. He's done well for himself, has Constantinos Frantzides. Modesty would be inappropriate.

Waking up to reality on defence issues

OPINION

By Loucas G. Charalambous

OUR DEFENCE has been rocked by everything that has gone on lately with regard to the subject," said the Chairman of the House Defence Committee, Takis Hadjidemetriou, during a radio discussion a few days ago. Adopting the same melodramatic tone after a recent meeting of the House Defence Committee, which had discussed extending the period of the higher defence levy, the Edeks deputy said: "If we do not approve the extension of the period of the higher levy, then it would be better to close the matter."

Hadjidemetriou is one of the self-styled military brains who thought up and then served the fairy-tale about the bolstering of our defence to the people. It is an amusing but admittedly dangerous little fable that has cost the taxpayer an astonishing amount of money — a sum that exceeds two billion pounds.

It is a consolation that some political parties, even this late in the day, have finally woken up to reality and are attempting to approach the whole matter with a bit more seriousness. Regardless of their motives, Akel and Diko, together with the United Democrats, are in a position to offer the country a unique service if they remain true to the correct positions — questioning the proposed arms purchases — that they have embraced recently. If they can put the brakes on the manic behaviour of the government with regard to irrational and pointless arms purchases, they would be doing their country a great favour, even if it is for all the wrong reasons.

The unprecedented fiasco of the Russian S-300 missile order, fortunately, has acted as a wake-up call for some political parties, ordinary people and even for certain self-styled warmongers, who had been misleading people for a long time with their support for an arms build-up. Today even the latter appear to have understood how wrong they were as they now question the usefulness of all these weapons which offer no added security, but which instead contribute towards the worsening of the acute economic problems faced by the country.

What is most astonishing is the Clerides government's audacity. After the tragicomic conclusion to the missile saga, which apart from humiliating us internationally also resulted in the squandering of £150 million, I would have thought that the government, aware of its culpability, would not have mentioned the phrase 'defence spending' at least until after a reasonable amount of time had elapsed if only to give the hapless taxpayer a chance to forget

this very costly gaffe.

There is an explanation for the government's perverse behaviour. President Clerides, for all those years he was leader of the main opposition party, not only had no faith in bolstering defence, but in reality viewed this as nothing more than a hollow slogan. Eventually, he too began to use defence as a slogan, after being told that he could endorse himself in the defiant socialist party, Edeks, from which he needed a significant number of votes in order to win the presidential elections. He therefore conjured up the need for the arrival in Cyprus of a Greek army division. He won the election but the Greek division never arrived, so in order to pre-empt criticism for misleading the electorate, he thought up the fairy-tale of the Unified Defence Dogma, which meant that he could continue to take the people for a ride.

After the unexpected demise of the Dogma in January 1996, on the rocks of the Aegean islet of Imia when Greece and Turkey were on the brink of war and the Dogma was exposed as the mockery it was, another fairy-tale had to be thought up to help Clerides in his bid for re-election in 1998. The S-300 missile deal proved to be a worthy replacement for the Dogma. It attracted a significant number of votes from the gullible who once again swallowed whole Clerides' fairy-tale.

The farcical conclusion to the missile saga and the inevitable personal humiliation for the president obviously affected Clerides deeply. For why else would he make a pledge, soon after the fiasco, to buy a missile system that was as good as the S-300s, if not in an attempt to salvage some pride and credibility? The fact that the government now wants to order an array of new weapons, including assault helicopters, is confirmation of this. Clerides appears to have been taken over by an intense desire to prove that, despite the S-300 fiasco, he takes orders from nobody and is still capable of bringing new weaponry to Cyprus, regardless of Turkish objections. It is in this context that his ingenious advisors have come up with the idea of buying assault helicopters.

Another interesting aspect of this arms-buying frenzy is the commissions from the purchases, which constitute a very strong motive for many of those handling the deals, actual or not.

One suggestion is for them to tell us the amounts they stand to make in commissions from the proposed purchases, and we then pay them this amount on condition that the new weapons are not bought. Admittedly, in such a case both our defence and Takis Hadjidemetriou would be rocked even more, but at least we would save huge amounts of money, and also prevent the ailing economy from becoming even more hard-pressed.

FEEDBACK

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