



Getty Images

## Moacyr Scliar

Public health expert and award-winning writer. Born on March 23, 1937, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, he died from complications of a stroke on Feb 27, 2011, in Porto Alegre, aged 73 years.

Moacyr Scliar's death marked the loss not only of a Brazilian public health leader, but also of a prolific, prize-winning literary figure. Many obituaries referred to him as a novelist, making no mention of his medical work, but colleagues said his two passions were inseparable. "Literature and medicine were intertwined in his life and helped him achieve success in both fields. What made him so human was knowing how to listen, so he could then tell the story", said cardiologist Aloyzio Achutti, who worked in the state health secretariat in Rio Grande do Sul in the 1970s, when Scliar was director of the public health department.

Scliar's dual vocation began when he was a medical student at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. His first book, *Stories of a Doctor in Training*, was published in 1962, the year he graduated. He later said that early book was premature, and considered *Carnival of the Animals*, published in 1968, his first real literary work. In the years that followed, Scliar combined literary creation with a career in public health in Porto Alegre, first in the municipal health department, then in the state secretariat where he headed the health education team, was medical assistance coordinator, and became director of the public health department. "Scliar had a special skill in transforming technical and policy information into precise messages that everyone could understand", said Jorge Ossana, who

worked with the team in its early years, before becoming head of the Inter-American Development Bank's health sector in Washington, DC. "His literary works reflect constant concern with social and economic problems and inequalities", Ossana said. "Literature allowed him to point out and criticise those inequalities, and his public health work gave him the opportunity to try to correct social differences and injustices."

At a time when most developing countries were focusing on combating infectious diseases, Scliar and his colleagues began addressing problems that also afflicted developed countries. Part of Scliar's legacy was "getting chronic diseases onto the public health agenda", Achutti said. Although some members of his team took jobs abroad or at the national Health Ministry, Scliar stayed in Porto Alegre, working in public health and teaching, except for graduate study in community medicine in Israel in 1970 and a stint as a visiting professor in the USA at Brown University in 1993. "Perhaps because his books became so widely known, he was content to stay close to home", Achutti said. Although Ossana left Brazil, his friendship with Scliar endured. "Throughout his professional life, Scliar remained the same simple, sincere person, and an affectionate, unconditional friend", Ossana said.

Writing fables that explored themes that went unmentioned during Brazil's military dictatorship, Scliar drew on Latin American literature's magical realism and the story-telling tradition of his own Jewish heritage. That heritage also surfaced in some of his non-fiction. His dissertation for his PhD in public health, obtained in 2002 from the National School of Public Health, was entitled, "From the Bible to Psychoanalysis: Health, Pain and Medicine in Jewish Culture." Although best known for dozens of short stories and novels, including *Max and the Cats* and *The Centaur in the Garden*, Scliar published non-fiction books on medical topics, including the work of Brazilian tropical disease research pioneers Oswaldo Cruz and Carlos Chagas.

Scliar wrote regularly for the Brazilian publication *Zero Hora*. His first column, about a car accident in which he was seriously injured, offered the perspective of both doctor and patient, combining an eye for medical detail with sensitivity to feeling and language. Comments left on the *Zero Hora* website after Scliar's death paid tribute to those abilities, with young authors expressing gratitude for his encouragement. Achutti said he also benefited from Scliar's literary advice. "He told me something that has helped me throughout my life, and not only in writing for newspapers: try to express your idea in a short text, never more than a page, both to hold the reader's attention and because newspaper space has a cost." Scliar, who was admitted to the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 2003, is survived by his wife of 50 years, Judith, and their son, Roberto.

Barbara Fraser