

## In Memoriam: Umberto Veronesi (1925–2016)

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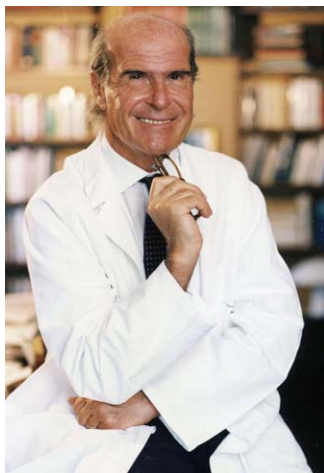
It was a privilege for me to first meet Umberto Veronesi, in a uniquely spacious office of the Milan 'Istituto dei Tumori' in 1976, as it corresponded to his position as Institute Director and accomplished surgeon and clinical researcher. Knowing of his impressive list of worldwide accomplishments, I wondered whether he could spare some minutes for an informal visit by a medical oncologist representing the Division of Cancer Treatment of the National Cancer Institute. Already, his concepts of studying the role of wide excision and nodal sampling in malignant melanoma and trials on breast preservation in lieu of the then standard radical mastectomy were familiar to me—partly from crossing paths during my training with the pioneering medical oncologist at the same Institute, Gianni Bonadonna (who predeceased him last year). The Institute in via Venezian 1 was a beehive of activity between its clinical services and research laboratories; in this occasion, as well as subsequent ones where he was featured at international meetings, he was always gracious to colleagues seeking a common goal. On this initial visit, I still remember his words expressing gratitude for the National Cancer Institute's support of his programs: "You must imagine that the American flag is fluttering on top of this Institute! We are most grateful for helping us conduct our research." In all subsequent occasions, this sense of a life-long mission, his ability in guiding lay people and physicians to work toward a common goal, and his gift for leadership were reinforced. Whether in his home base or elsewhere in Europe, in Asia, or in North and Latin America, he was the consummate representative of the humane and scientific aspects of cancer research and patient care.

With regard to his connection with patients, a personal anecdote concerns a young woman who became his patient in the early 1990s after undergoing breast-conserving surgery. She had subsequently seen me in Los Angeles seeking further advice on adjuvant treatment. A decade later, knowing of my occasional travels, she contacted me wondering if we could meet at Professor Veronesi's office. I indicated, however, that it was not feasible for me to go to Rome on this occasion, where he was working given his recent appointment as Italian Minister of Health. She informed me that he was reachable as usual for his patients every Monday

at his patient care office. We were able to easily coordinate this joint visit: a clear indication of his priorities and his incredible qualities as a surgeon and caregiver.

During and after his tenure at the Milan Istituto dei Tumori, his vision and accomplishments propelled him as a leader in the international arena. He was president of the EORTC from 1985 to 1988, (without changing the acronym, its name was broadened from European Organization of Research on Treatment of Cancer to Research *and* Treatment of Cancer) and founded the European Institute of Oncology in Milan, which he envisioned as an international hub for clinical and basic research.

Gordon McVie, who joined him in this enterprise in 2007 and launched *ecancermedicalscience* (a most successful electronic journal in all aspects of oncology), summarized many of Veronesi's accomplishments, beginning by pioneering "... the sentinel node biopsy procedure to avoid lymph node dissection, and intraoperative radiotherapy in breast cancer. Veronesi also fostered the concepts of adjuvant chemotherapy and chemoprevention, continually striving not to take anything for granted and driven by curiosity to find better ways of doing things. He is widely acknowledged by his peers as a visionary who led a humanitarian crusade to improve the lot of mankind and maintain the dignity of cancer sufferers. In this quest he initiated the Science for Peace, and the Future of Science global conventions, founded the European Institute of Oncology (IEO), the European School of Oncology, the Umberto Veronesi Foundation, The European Society of Breast Cancer Specialists, and Europa Donna. He authored more than 790 papers on Clinical and Experimental



Umberto Veronesi

Oncology and 12 oncological treatises. Between April 2000 and June 2001 Veronesi was Minister of Health in the Italian government and was Senator of the sixteenth Italian Parliament from April 2008 to February 2011. Further to his belief that knowledge should be free, in 2007 Professor Veronesi and I co-founded *ecancer.org*, a pioneering online open access journal and medical education platform. The goal of the organization both then and now is to speed up free cancer communication globally and improve patient care via better professional education. *ecancer.org* continues to be an embodiment of Veronesi's

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vision of an independent cancer journal that is free to read and is mainly funded by charitable grants and sponsorship. During his career, he also served as the head of organizations, including the International Society of Cancer Chemoprevention, the International Union Against Cancer, the Committee of Cancer Experts of the European Union, and the Federation of European Cancer Societies (FECS), and was EORTC President from 1985 to 1988.” (<http://www.ecancermedicalscience.com>)

In this column, I have evoked aspects of his presence in oncology and his legacy. Mostly, he will be missed by everyone who had the privilege to work with him over the years, and by his patients and family. It is remarkable that his last exhortation to us was to “carry on our work because the whole world needs science and reason.” On a local level, he was instrumental in promoting Italian-U.S. research exchanges and provided much guidance and inspiration to the founder of the American

Italian Cancer Foundation—an enterprise that provides much needed support for young scientists predominantly from Italy. Furthermore, as oncologists, we stand in awe of the remarkable accomplishments in cancer therapeutics and prevention that took place at the Istituto dei Tumori of Milano (short for Istituto Nazionale per la cura e studio dei Tumori). It was founded in 1925 and eventually led by physician-mayor Pietro Bucalossi from 1956 to 1975 and from 1976 to 1994 by his disciple, Umberto Veronesi; under their leadership, pioneers such Gianni Bonadonna and other prominent oncologists flourished. The organization also participated in drug development in collaboration with the pharmaceutical industry, emanating from the laboratory of Aurelio DiMarco and Anna Maria Casazza to implementation of curative strategies, including adriamycin for breast cancer and Hodgkin’s lymphoma, heralding the current era of translational research.