OBITUARY

OBITUARY- Riccardo Saccardi (20th April 1956–19th February 2024)

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In February 2024, the international stem cell transplantation and autoimmune disease communities lost a distinguished clinician and scientist with the death of Dr Riccardo Saccardi at the age of 67 years, after a long illness that never impaired his intense activity devoted to innovation in science and progress in clinical practice through standardization.

Riccardo's scientific career was largely devoted to improving knowledge and exploring the application of hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HCT) in refractory autoimmune diseases (ADs), particularly multiple sclerosis (MS), including many years of close working and leadership within the European Society for Blood and Marrow Transplantation (EBMT). He was also an international leader in quality improvement and regulatory issues for hematopoietic cellular therapies and had leadership roles with 'JACIE' (Joint Accreditation Committee of International Society for Cellular Therapy [ISCT] and EBMT).

Riccardo was born and educated in Florence, Italy. After graduating in 1981, he joined the Postgraduate Fellowship in Haematology at the Florence University. From 1987 to 1988 he was a visiting scientist at the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit at Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris and at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

From 1990 Riccardo worked at Careggi University Hospital in Florence, mainly in HCT and cellular therapies, in several roles, including Medical Director of the Florence Cord Blood Bank from 1996 and then Director of the Cord Blood Bank from 2009 to 2016. From 2011 to 2012, he coordinated a two-year international project on biobanking and cord blood cell transplantation in collaboration with CNT/CNS (Centro Nazionale Trapianti/Centro Nazionale Sangue), Careggi University Hospital and Eurocord at the Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris. From 2016, Riccardo held the position of Director of the Cellular Therapies and Transfusion Medicine Unit. Under his direction, many projects concerning regenerative medicine, stem cell manipulation, CAR-T and other immune effector cell therapies were implemented in Careggi University Hospital.

Riccardo made a huge contribution within the EBMT as Chair of the Autoimmune Diseases Working Party (ADWP) of the EBMT from 2004 to 2010. In 2008 he was the Chair of the Scientific Committee for the EBMT Annual Congress held in Florence, and, in 2009, organized an important international congress on HCT for severe autoimmune diseases, again in Florence (Fig. 1). He strongly promoted the cross-fertilization and a multidisciplinary approach across different specialties leadingneurologists, rheumatologists, gastroenterologists, immunologists, and internists with the hematology and transplant community in cooperative projects.

Riccardo also played major leadership in JACIE, contributing as a highly active inspector, member of the FACT-JACIE Standards Steering Committee and serving as Medical Director of JACIE from 2016 to 2020. Riccardo was key-leader in developing and delivering an international, modern, and risk-adapted benchmarking program for HCT outcome across individual EBMT Centers, as a means of quality assuring the HCT process and meeting FACT-JACIE accreditation requirements [1].

In Italy, Riccardo was an active member of GITMO (Gruppo Italiano per il Trapianto di Midollo Osseo), serving also as coordinator for the GITMO-Neuro Intergroup [2] from 1998 to 2003, pioneering HCT in MS at a national level, while engaging the cellular transplant and the neurological communities. Furthermore, Riccardo recently participated in the development and delivery of CAR-T cells and immune effector cells within the EBMT and GITMO, focusing on regulatory aspects.

Riccardo was the leader of many national and international research projects and clinical trials for the development of autologous HCT in severe and refractory forms of MS [3] (such as the randomized, phase II, EBMT ASTIMS trial [4]), significantly contributing to the evidence base for reducing disability and improving quality of life and supporting translational science in immune reconstitution. He also actively contributed to many research projects and clinical trials in other indications in HCT, bone marrow and cord blood stem cell biology, cellular therapies (including CAR-T and mesenchymal stromal cells), and regenerative medicine. He published over 220 peer-reviewed articles in high impact journals. He received the 'Best Abstract Award' at the American Society of Hematology (ASH) Annual Meeting in 2011, and the 'Van Bekkum Award' at the EBMT Annual Meeting in 2013.

Riccardo devoted his life to his profession. He was always available for patients and cared for all of them with the same high-level standard, treating them diligently, and with respect and dignity. Riccardo was a mentor and role model for many scientists and clinicians across different specialties, and their professional appointments at national and international levels are a testament of his deep commitment to the future of medicine and science and his trust in a multidisciplinary approach in medicine. In this regard, he also dedicated much time to lecturing students and supporting their dissertations, thesis and scientific outputs.

Riccardo's professional life was mirrored by his dedication to his family. He leaves his wife, Claudia, his daughter, Camilla, and grandchild Timo, as well as his extended family and friends with whom he shared his many interests, including travel and sailing.

Paolo Muraro, Professor of Neurology, Neuroimmunology and Immunotherapy at Imperial College London (UK), said '*I can only think of Riccardo equally highly as a clinician, a researcher and a person. He was keen to meet, discuss, understand: his "door" was always open. As a clinician he was dedicated beyond the duty of care to his patients. Riccardo's expertise in clinical research was in demand: he was often invited to speak at conferences outside his*

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Fig. 1 Riccardo Saccardi.

own medical specialism, a testimony to the inter-disciplinary nature of much of his work and of his high reputation. We took many pleasant and productive opportunities to meet at neurological or hematological conferences, or in Florence when I visited for lecturing or our many collaborations. He was always keen to learn, engage and discuss our work and common interests, which he would do with his soft-spoken voice and understated demeanor, but always thoughtfully and with relentless determination. He made many outstanding contributions to the field, but he never overemphasized them. I hugely miss him'.

Basil Sharrack, Professor of Clinical Neurology in the University of Sheffield (UK), reflected '*I first met Riccardo in Chicago in a meeting which was arranged by Richard Burt. Richard introduced Riccardo as a leading Italian transplant haematologist. Throughout the meeting Riccardo spoke in a very soft, gentle, and composed manner to the extent that I had to check if Riccardo was really Italian! As a person, Riccardo was a gentleman, as a researcher, Riccardo was a legend. He had the gift of being able to look though data to find ideas and solutions and he was always able to take any project he was involved into fruition. We lost a very dear friend, but his legacy will remain immortal*'.

Dominique Farge, Professor of Internal Medicine, Hospital Practitioner at AP-HP, Public Assistance - Hospitals of Paris (FR), recalled '*when I first met Riccardo 20 years ago, he was just nominated the ADWP secretary, being a recognized and distinguished Italian hematologist from Florence. Immediately, I noticed he was discrete, tall and elegant, with a quiet and calm voice and brown light gaze. Italian elegance and style as we shall always remember, both physically and in the society. Progressively, while deeply cooperating with the neurological community and EBMT colleagues, he then pioneered the development of autologous HCT as the first therapeutic approach to achieve long-term remission in relapsing-remitting MS. This was far from an easy task, but Riccardo never complained, nor expressed any doubts. As I used to tell him often these last 3 years, throughout his own battle with his dreadful disease he behaved like a hero and continued to achieve a lot for our patients and for the EBMT, across the different fields of cellular therapy. We thank and honor the memory of Riccardo, who stayed a year in Paris with us at St-Louis hospital and with the EBMT officers. Patients with MS all around the word will never forget him, nor his colleagues and friends*'.

Riccardo was a good friend to many. His exemplary leadership and commitment to the national and international transplant community will be profoundly missed and stay as reference for the entire community.

Andrea Bacigalupo[1,2], Francesca Bonifazi[3], Fabio Ciceri[4], Eliane Gluckman[5,6], Raffaella Greco[4], Chiara Nozzoli[7], Letizia Lombardini[8], Massimo Martino[9], Alessandro Rambaldi[10,11], Vanderson Rocha[12], Annalisa Ruggeri[4]✉, John Snowden[13] and Anna Sureda[14]

[1]*Dipartimento di Diagnostica per Immagini, Radioterapia Oncologica e Ematologia, Fondazione Policlinico Universitario Agostino Gemelli IRCCS, Rome, Italy.* [2]*Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Roma, Italy.* [3]*IRCCS Azienda Ospedaliero-Universitaria Di Bologna, Istituto Di Ematologia "Seràgnoli", Bologna, Italy.* [4]*Unit of Hematology and Bone Marrow Transplantation, IRCCS San Raffaele Hospital, Vita-Salute San Raffaele University, Milan, Italy.* [5]*Eurocord, Institut de Recherche de Saint-Louis (IRSL) EA3518, Hôpital Saint-Louis, Université Paris Cité, Paris, France.* [6]*Monacord, Centre Scientifique de Monaco, Monaco, Monaco.* [7]*Cell Therapy and Transfusion Medicine Unit, Careggi University Hospital, Florence, Italy.* [8]*Italian National Transplant Center, National Institute of Health, Rome, Italy.* [9]*Stem Cell Transplantation and Cellular Therapies Unit (CTMO), Department of Hemato-Oncology and Radiotherapy Grande Ospedale Metropolitano "Bianchi-Melacrino-Morelli", Reggio, Calabria, Italy.* [10]*Department of Oncology and Hematology, University of Milan, Milan, Italy.* [11]*Azienda Socio Sanitaria Territoriale Papa Giovanni XXIII, Bergamo, Italy.* [12]*Service of Hematology, Transfusion and Cell Therapy, and Laboratory of Medical Investigation in Pathogenesis and Directed Therapy in Onco-Immuno-Hematology (LIM-31), Hospital das Clínicas, Faculty of Medicine, São Paulo University, São Paulo, Brazil.* [13]*Department of Haematology, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Division of Clinical Medicine, School of Medicine and Population Health, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.* [14]*Clinical Hematology Department, Institut Català d'Oncologia-L'Hospitalet, IDIBELL, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.*
✉*email: annalisaruggeri80@hotmail.com*

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.