



Obituary

In Memoriam of Riccardo Saccardi (Careggi University Hospital, Florence), eminent hematologist and a remarkable innovator in the treatment of autoimmune diseases by means of novel methodologies in HSC transplantation

On February 19, 2024, Riccardo Saccardi passed away in the presence of his beloved family. Riccardo was one of the pioneering leaders in stem cell transplantation in autoimmune diseases, inspiring generations of young investigators in this field, since he was a model for a new generation of scientists who could embrace the world of fast-evolving technology and bring it to bear on research issues in this heterogeneous field of cellular therapy applied to a modern – multifaceted – approach. All those who have known Riccardo personally treasured him for his expertise, his capability of analyzing and scrutinizing new scientific results, his incorruptibility and his wide cultural interests, including travel and sailing.

His passionate commitment to translational medicine was an example for many of us. His daily activity was based on resolving questions in several disciplines, including transfusion medicine, advanced technology, stem cell transplantation and the use of cellular therapies for multiple purposes, inside and outside the hematological field. Riccardo was one of those unique individuals who could produce high quality clinical research embracing novel technologies and using simple protocols. With a strong background in hematology, immunology and transfusion medicine, he entered the world of cell immunology in autoimmune diseases, with particular emphasis on multiple sclerosis.

Riccardo was born and educated in Florence. From 1990 he worked at Careggi University Hospital in Florence, Italy mainly in the stem cell transplantation unit. Before this, from 1987 to 1988 he had been a visiting scientist at the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit at Hopital Saint-Louis in Paris and at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. From 2016, Riccardo held the position of Director of the Cellular Therapies and Transfusion Medicine Department at Careggi University Hospital.

He was a leader within the European Society for Blood and Marrow Transplantation (EBMT) and played a pivotal role in quality improvement and regulatory issues for hematopoietic cellular therapies, since he also held leadership roles within 'JACIE' (Joint Accreditation Committee of International Society for Cellular Therapy-ISCT-and EBMT).

Riccardo chaired many national and international clinical trials as well as research projects aimed at developing autologous HCT in

multiple sclerosis, including the randomized, phase II, EBMT ASTIMS trial.

Among his numerous scientific achievements and commitments, I was impressed by his capacity to supervise multidisciplinary groups constituted of different specialties including neurologists, rheumatologists, gastroenterologists, immunologists and hematologists. His interactions with leaders in immunology, neurology, hematology etc was very productive for everybody and led to significant achievements in his field. One of his most notable achievements was to apply the rigor of standardization to flow cytometric and related methodologies and applications in the area of stem cell transplantation and cellular therapy. He used "big data", as a data-rich technology and worked with several leading data scientists to utilize a variety of technologies in the autoimmune transplantation field.

Like all the really great minds, Riccardo was always collaborative and amicable, eager to disseminate and discuss his knowledge in any formal and informal meeting. Despite the evolution of his illness, he continued to accept invitations to lecture until the end of his life.

The last time I had the great pleasure to meet him was in Naples (Italy) on 24 November 2023 where he chaired a session on transplantation in autoimmune diseases, together with Prof Chiara Bonini (San Raffaele University, Milan) during the Annual Meeting of GIIMA Society, discussing the role of mesenchymal cells in the treatment of autoimmune diseases. He was ill, but his speech was fluent and clear, thus confirming his commitment to research despite a long illness that never impaired his intense scientific and clinical activity.

I was fortunate enough to know him not only professionally but also personally. In fact, this allowed me to perceive qualities that were greater and rarer than intelligence: humility, simplicity and sensitivity.

With his death, Riccardo has left a great void, the loss of a reference point for the scientific community in Europe.

We have lost a beautiful soul, an intelligent scientist, a remarkable innovator and, above all, a generous colleague.

I do hope that everything he has sown will bear fruit and that he will continue to be an example for those who follow in his footsteps.



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