

Obituary

Commemorating Professor Renzo Galanello (July 21st 1948 - May 13th 2013)

On May 13th 2013, Professor Renzo Galanello lost his 7-month battle with cancer. The European Hematology Association grieves the loss of Renzo along with his wife, Maria-Antonietta, and his children Giulia, Giacomo and Giovanni.

Dr. Galanello was Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Cagliari, Italy, and Director of the 2nd Pediatric Clinic, Department of Biomedical Sciences and Biotechnologies, Ospedale Regionale per le Microcitemie. He was an accomplished scientist, a caring physician, and a humble and sincere man, and everyone recognized his integrity.

Born July 21st 1948 in Parrano, Umbria, Central Italy, Renzo became an international statesman in science and medicine, with his greatest contributions in the fields of thalassemia and genetics. PubMed cites him in 230 publications, 5 in 2013. He also wrote several chapters in hematology textbooks, including Wintrobe's Clinical Hematology. He was on the Editorial Advisory Board of *Haematologica*, a reviewer for several medical and scientific journals, and an advisor to numerous patient organizations.

Renzo graduated from the University of Perugia. He was appointed Assistant Professor in Clinical Pediatrics at the University of Perugia, almost at the same time as he completed his specialization in Pediatrics. His natural proclivity towards science soon emerged with his first publication on screening techniques to detect thalassemia early in pregnancy. Little did he know that his work would lead to the establishment of an internationally acclaimed laboratory in genetics and hemoglobinopathies.

From 1983 to 1985, he completed a Fellowship with Dr. George Stamatoyannopoulos at the University of Washington, Seattle, where he investigated the pharmacologic manipulation of genes to induce fetal hemoglobin. In 1988, Dr. Galanello was promoted to Associate Professor of Metabolic Diseases of Children at the University of Cagliari, Sardinia, and became full Professor of Pediatrics in 2000.

His research in Sardinia was facilitated by a relatively pure genetic pool of thalassemia patients among local residents on the island. Whether conducting studies on genome wide associations, or revealing the connection between cholelithiasis and Gilbert's syndrome in homozygous beta thalassemia, or discovering new variants of thalassemia, Renzo's basic understanding of genetics and his probing mind led to novel discoveries and a deeper understanding of the disease to which he devoted much of his professional life. Because he was able to identify the most common gene defects leading to thalassemia on the island, he was able to introduce an effective preventative program in Sardinia. By 1991, a decline in the incidence of thalassemia major from 1:250 to 1:1,000 live births had been reported.

Renzo widened his scientific interest to include iron chelators as a means of reducing morbidity and mortality in patients with thalassemia. He was a principal investi-



Renzo Galanello in 2009.

gator in the pivotal trial of deferiprone in thalassemia, and his ongoing investigation into the safety and efficacy of deferiprone led to a sound and balanced understanding of the use of this iron chelator. Pharmaceutical companies sought him out in phase I-III studies to obtain early insight into their new compounds, including deferasirox and FBS0701.

Renzo Galanello was a visionary in iron chelation, realizing that targeting cardiac iron might have a profound impact on survival. He compared the ability of deferiprone and deferoxamine to reduce cardiac iron concentrations and improve cardiac function in thalassemia patients. He furthered research in the field by pioneering different approaches using combinations of deferiprone and deferoxamine to maximize cardiac protection, leading to a decrease in heart disease and increased survival. He demonstrated the benefits of combined therapy in patients with severe myocardial siderosis and left ventricular dysfunction, providing a scientific rationale for new options for patients at imminent risk of a cardiovascular event. Most recently, he explored the potential of combining deferoxamine with deferasirox as another approach to combined chelation. He also investigated chelation in iron-related neurodegeneration. It is most appropriate that PubMed's last entry for Prof. Galanello's publications, prior to his passing, was co-authored with his close friend and colleague Dr. Antonio Piga.

Prof. Galanello also saw the bigger picture. Tuned into the lives of his patients, he observed a transition period since the 1970s. The original goal had been to help parents in detecting thalassemia in their unborn children, giving them the choice to take preventative action if they so chose. But by the mid-2000s, the focus had evolved towards optimizing care for patients with thalassemia as it became evident that it was possible to decrease morbidity and mortality, leading to full and productive lives.

This insight led him to expound on the changing paradigm in thalassemia in an important scientific communication, "A thalassaemic child becomes adult". Indeed, within seven years, he would publish another paper citing the growing numbers of pregnancies in thalassemia patients in Italy, and reporting on patients' enhanced ability to become pregnant and safely bring their own children into the world.

From a personal viewpoint, I was privileged to know the human side of Renzo, an even bigger dimension than that of the great scientist and clinician he was. His life embodied gentleness, humility, and a profound care and respect for others. Often, when we discussed different issues, he would tell me what his patients had said, what his patients wanted, and what he wanted to do to meet their needs, as one friend caring for another.

If you had time to talk about Life with Renzo, it was evident that he thought and cared deeply about important matters like his family and friends and Nature, seeking to be honest and respectful of all these things. His love and understanding of Nature would emerge as you walked with him down to the sea by his summer home

where he loved to swim in the crystal clear waters of the Mediterranean, refreshed, as it were, by Nature herself. On the way, he would identify the array of scents coming from the flowers growing along the path down to the sea, as much an expert here as he was in his lab.

Renzo, we are grateful for the privilege of knowing you; a deeply caring clinician, an accomplished scientist, a man who really made a difference.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Professor Antonio Piga and Dr. Fernando Tricta, long-time friends and colleagues of Renzo, for their helpful review and comments on this tribute.

A fuller version of this text is available on the International BioIron Society website. Available from: <http://www.bioiron.org>

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