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# Obituary

## *Virginio Porta*

Professor Virginio Porta died in Milan on 8 April 1984 at the age of 80. He was born on 31 January 1904 in Turin but his family was one hundred percent Lombard and Virginio was always proud to share the surname of the celebrated Milanese poet, Carlo Porta, although there were no ties of descent.

He took his degree in 1928 in the young University of Milan, discussing with Professor Foà a thesis on a physiological topic, hyperventilation tetany, and, after brief spells in general practice and several months in the Department of Neuropsychiatry of Rome University, directed by S. De Sanctis, for research into myopathies, he became an assistant at the Department of Nervous and Mental Diseases of Milan University, whose seat was in, and in practice was one and the same thing as, the Vittorio Emanuele III Neurological Institute, founded and directed by Professor Carlo Besta, who held the chair.

His scientific work in that decade dealt inter alia with: the neurology of the autonomic system and neuroendocrinology with special reference to the physiopathology of the diencephalon and hypophysis; the biochemistry of the cerebrospinal fluid; metabolic disorders in extrapyramidal syndromes; the chemical theory of the neurotransmission of nerve impulses; the pathology and treatment of myasthenia; myodystrophic syndromes; meningoradiculitis and polyneuritis; medullary necroses in tuberculous spondylitis and pachymeningitis, the nervous consequences of injury to the cord; Lindau disease and intracranial malformations; acute skull and brain injuries; chordoma of the clivus; vestibular function in parietal tumors; optokinetic nystagmus in diseases of the brain; a case of cerebellopontine spongioblastoma with recurring subarachnoid hemorrhage; a complex autonomic syndrome; Schilder disease.

The death of Besta at the end of 1940 led to the separation of the Istituto Neurologico from the University Department of Nervous and Mental Diseases. The directorship of the former fell to Vercelli and of the latter temporarily to Porta and permanently to Professor G.C. Riquier, with Porta as his chief assistant.

After the war he took charge of pathological psychology at the University and was more than ripe for the chair of mental and nervous diseases. If there was a neuropsychiatrist in Italy worthy of the job of teaching the new generations of future doctors, it was he by unanimous consent. But circumstances were against him. Most of all the premature loss of the master's support dashed his legitimate hopes, to the detriment not so much of Porta as of neuropsychiatry in our country. Virginio became director of the S. Lazzaro Psychiatric Institute, Reggio Emilia, an institution whose prestige shone throughout Europe until the last century. The appointment involved the editorship of the equally prestigious *Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria*. He was head of the institute from 1953 to 1956, during which he devoted himself to intensive reorganisation, remembered to this day.

He then decided to come home to Milan as head of the Division of Neuropsychiatry of the Ospedale Maggiore, later split into Psychiatry and Neurology. He remained head of the latter until he reached the age of seventy in 1974.

Porta was one of the last representatives in Italy of neuropsychiatry as one field, whose capacity for analysis and synthesis ranged from the peripheral and autonomic to the central nervous system and from the brain to the individual psyche and social repercussions, from neurobiology to neuropsychiatry and psychopathology to social psychiatry.

With him we have lost a man of great culture, open to the problems of philosophy in general and to humanistic studies, quick to respond to stimuli from nature and from the works of man, from history and from art. Devoted to Plato's triple ideal of the True, the Beautiful and the Good.

B. Disertori