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Alessandro Liberati



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“A better collaboration among patients, researchers, decision-makers and national health systems is needed to improve health research”. These words describe the essence of Alessandro Liberati’s way of thinking. Alessandro, 57, one of the leading epidemiologists in Italy, passed away on 1 January 2012. He had been diagnosed with multiple myeloma more than 10 years ago. The experience of the disease, which characterised the last decade of his life, reinforced his conviction that research findings should be more accessible to patients and to people who make decisions about a patient’s health.

Alessandro graduated from the University of Milan’s Medical School in 1978 and began working as a research fellow in the Laboratory of Clinical Pharmacology at the Mario Negri Institute. He spent 1 year at the Harvard School of Public Health studying epidemiology and statistics. While there, he developed two interests that he pursued for the rest of his life: evidence synthesis (systematic reviews and meta-analyses) and the

importance of a patient’s perspective. In these fields, he soon became one of the most prominent scientists in the world.

In 1994 he founded and directed the Italian Cochrane Centre. Alessandro was one of the pioneers of evidence synthesis, analysing randomised controlled trials of health interventions in oncology and intensive care medicine. One of his main projects was the systematic review of the assessment of the effects of antibiotic prophylaxis in critically ill patients (Selective Decontamination of the Digestive Tract, Trialists Collaborative Group, 1993).

In 1998, he was appointed Associate Professor of Medical Statistics in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Modena. In 2004, Alessandro was chosen to drive an integrated research system, bringing together medical schools and public hospitals in Emilia Romagna, a north Italian region. Since 2005 he had been a member of Italy’s National Committee for Health Research and of the Research and Development Committee of the Italian Drug Agency.

Over the years he became increasingly frustrated by the way the best interests of the patients and the

public were not the principal drivers of the medical research agenda. But he was a real fighter, who did not give up easily. He always worked towards establishing a strategic alliance among all the stakeholders (patients, clinicians, policy-makers) and the academic and institutional researchers. And you could be sure that whenever Alessandro was involved, these principles were safe.

Having to find a common thread connecting all his many interests, research as a civil passion is the theme that characterised his life. Research was, for Alessandro, a means to improve the world and the actual state of things. He was aware that changes happen slowly but, with continuous commitment, they do take place. Being close to Alessandro was contagious, and those who had the good fortune to work with him were eventually infected.

The message he leaves us is that there is no research without the commitment of doing things that are useful and important for people, patients and their relatives.

We like to think that his messages, his thoughts, his example, his being a scientist, friend and father, and even the way he faced his disease during the last 10 years, will help all of us to better manage the tasks that we will encounter in the future.

The best way to remember him is to continue his work, pursuing it with the same commitment, passion and determination that have always characterised him.

Alessandro leaves behind his wife, Mariangela, and two daughters, Elisa and Valeria.

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