

Attilio Maseri, Italian cardiologist of universal value

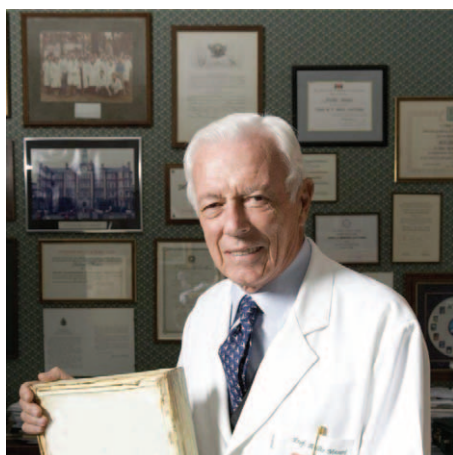
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Attilio Maseri was born in Udine on November 12, 1935 and left this earthly world in Pavia di Udine on September 3, 2021. He brilliantly graduated in Medicine and Surgery at Padua University in 1960 and, married to his beloved Francesca Florio, soon moved to Pisa, inspired by a paper on Radioisotopes in Medicine – an absolute and intriguing novelty at those times. There, his desire to be an innovative cardiologist became clear, willing to build the future with his own hands by working at the Medical Clinic of Gabriele Monasterio, where junior doctors, fellows and assistants were tutored and mentored by Luigi Donato.

Maseri is one of few physicians to become a lifetime member of the Johns Hopkins Society of Scholars (1988). Awarded the King Faisal International Prize in Medicine in 1992 for his contributions to the understanding of coronary artery disease, on 1997 he was prized with the Distinguished Scientist Award by the American College of Cardiology. In 2002 he received the Gold Medal of the European Society of Cardiology. In 2004 he accepted the Grand Prix Scientifique della Lefoulon-Delalande Foundation for the clinical studies on vasomotor function in angina pectoris. Appointed Commander of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic in 1989, he was promoted

to Knight Grand Cross of the same Order in 2005. Pope John Paul II appointed him Knight Commander of the St. Gregory the Great Order.

Maseri spent a fruitful 3-year period in New York at the school of Nobel Laureate André F. Cournand and at Johns Hopkins Medical School in Philadelphia. In 1968, the National Research Council (CNR) decided to activate in Pisa the Clinical Physiology Institute, built with a strategy co-shared by various public institutions (university, hospital and CNR) in order to welcome, care for and mentor junior talents, strongly grounded with an interdisciplinary and universal quality context.

Maseri was entrusted by the CNR to lead the novel Coronary Group to recruit junior people from different fields. The Pisan period offered to Maseri, as researcher and university teacher, the opportunity to hone in on and deliver his skills to young doctors and technicians, also leading to the implementation of his global mission as a modern scientist and efficacious mentor, consistently triggering new paths for producing knowledge in cardiology. In fact, many learned from him to look at the medical world without barriers as well as without prejudices, sowing research questions and systematically practising a pathophysiological approach, linking always science to teaching and to patient care.



The Coronary Group became the spearhead of the IFC-CNR where multidisciplinary facets could count on motivated doctors, researchers, technicians and administrators, even though Pisa was devoid of the cardiac surgery that was exploding elsewhere. Largely composed

of young people with different backgrounds and origins, this group did constitute the clinical and scientific visibility brand of an institute capable of hosting and harmonizing the talents of epidemiologists, engineers, physicists, mathematicians, physicians, nurses, etc. with the most updated equipment among any Italian academic centres of that time. His work in Pisa did elicit the attention of people worldwide. It is nice to remember that at the American Heart Association Congress in Anaheim in 1976, his talk on Coronary Spasm was interrupted by firefighters, as the Orange Room was extremely crowded far beyond what was allowed.

As Director of Cardiology, Attilio Maseri spent 12 years in London (from 1979 to 1991) at the Royal Postgraduate School at the Hammersmith Hospital, 10 years in Rome (from 1991 to 2001) at the Catholic University Sacro Cuore of Gemelli Hospital and finally 7 years in Milan (from 2001 to 2008) at Vita-Salute University of S. Raffaele, until retirement.

Despite human limits, he proved that anyone can build a future if he/she opens up to others with a far-sighted vision that links teaching and research to healthcare. In this regard, an example of trust and audacity follows – surely a minor one among the many that will emerge from everywhere to frame Maseri's fruitful life in the scientific world! In November 1973, Atlantic City (NJ, USA) hosted the American Heart Association congress where Attilio Maseri, accompanied by Antonio L'Abbate and Antonio Pesola, gave three amazing talks on coronary flow measured using Xenon. Richard Gorlin of Harvard Medical School encouraged one of the present authors, who was in Boston as Cardiovascular Research Fellow thanks to a scholarship given by the Academic Senate of Pavia University, to attend the AH meeting to have a chance of learning new things. Once he had listened to his presentations and met Maseri, it was 'naturally easy' for the Italian Fellow to ask him about the opportunities in the novel Coronary Group to do clinical research. Thus, the magic jump from Peter Bent Brigham Hospital of Boston to Pisa University and CNR became reality in just a little less than a year.

The previous storytelling, one of several that occurred to doctors of different countries, testifies that with his guidance and teachings, a young doctor could easily understand that scientific work is needed to inform the community of the data obtained to find solutions and tackle critical medical problems. The publications are not papers meant to speed up the career steps.

At that time, the wish to study and publish was strong among young people who did try to attend, in a short span of years, the temples of cardiology. The motivation stemmed from the clues that pathophysiological concepts as well as hemodynamic, angiographic and non-invasive imaging methods were changing the destinies of cardiology. Nowadays, it hurts to see that the majority of Fellows

of Cardiology, at least in Italy, are only covering financially rewarding procedures, while it is crystal clear that the triad of research, education and patient care is the only one that brings innovation, sound results and benefit to patients.

In the 1970s, during the years spent by Attilio Maseri in Pisa, there was in Italy a flourishing cooperation between cardiologists and heart surgeons, working either in hospitals or in universities, partly the merit of finalized biomedical projects of the CNR, partly of GISSI study on acute myocardial infarction and partly of pharmaceutical companies that all invested money to enhance the growth of modern cardiology throughout the world. Furthermore, the strong stimuli deriving from Maseri's Pisan studies on coronary pathophysiology increased the self-esteem of several Italian centres, which published outstanding research in international journals on cardiac arrhythmias, myocardial infarction, cardiac imaging, cardiac surgery, clinical trials, etc. There were wonderful clinical cardiology centres, Pavia as an example, that acted as scientific communities, generative of ideas and talents of great impact all over the country and in Europe for the years to come. Nevertheless, all those efforts were not effective at achieving a Unitarian Cardiology Society in Italy.

Despite this, Attilio Maseri did carry on his shoulders the role of Ambassador of European Cardiology in all the continents, cultivating not only scientific relationships (he was one of few Europeans to be in the Editorial Board of NEJM) but also memorable friendships as the natural extension and added value of scientific interactions. Such an endeavour did lead Maseri to meeting Maria Grazia Modena in her role as President of the Italian Society of Cardiology (SIC) that she served at very high human costs, being a valuable and noble dream.

Maria Grazia reported: 'The myth of a prestigious, handsome and elegant man was such that I felt paralyzed when he sat down close because it was the only free place in an official dinner organized during a Cardiologists' meeting in Modena. I wouldn't have uttered a syllable if a waitress hadn't relieved the tension, serving him lots of tagliatelle al ragù, while addressing him in sweet dialect, loud, ... *cum te bel, cum te bel.*'

On several occasions, Maseri expressed clearly his desire and goodwill to have Italian cardiology united as well as focussed on research questions of universal value. The address he gave, at the kick-off of the Presidency of the Italian Federation of Cardiology, tells all about this:

'It is a real pleasure and great satisfaction for me, as President of the Federation of Italian Cardiology (FIC), to present the splendid results of constructive collaboration between the different societies. This is further proof of the potential of a united Italian Cardiology, potentialities that are progressively becoming reality as I had the

pleasure of seeing in all the meetings of the FIC Board and which already appear on the horizon also in the Federal Council where the respective Presidents (G. Di Pasquale, L. Bolognese and M. G. Modena), are to be warmly congratulated as architects of this success. All this, I hope, will serve as a stimulating and driving example.

‘It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to give the official “blessing” of the Italian Federation of Cardiology to this comprehensive overview of the activities, significant results and programs of the Italian Society of Cardiology (SIC). However, rapid and massive growth inevitably tends to generate fragmentation. National Association of Italian Hospital Cardiologists (ANMCO) & SIC – with commendable foresight – had the vision of the immense potential that Italian cardiology could acquire if it presented itself united, with a single voice.

‘The time has indeed come, now, to make visible the immense political power of a united cardiovascular world to: Optimize cardiovascular clinical practice Organize professional cardiovascular training, promote cardiovascular research by joining forces.

‘With goodwill and dedication, SIC, ANMCO and other scientific societies will get inspired by the best practices and surely will be commended for this initiative. The FIC is here to coordinate and harmonize efforts, as fighting together for ambitious goals is more productive, enjoyable, and rewarding for the various entities than arguing with each other!’

Maseri’s leadership was of great inspiration to Italian cardiologists, whose primary target remained the union of different societies – a target that was missed. Nevertheless, he did not renounce or resign to the principles and thus he supported an experimental try-out, the Heart Care Foundation, as President from 2008 to 2015, to pursue the coveted union.

In private and public grounds, with his usual humble generosity, Attilio confided that he was emotionally ready to make available not only his personal properties but also all that was needed to create a foundation as an expression of the unity of an Italian heart association. In his view, the impetus toward such a target was rationally based on the evidence that the talents of all could have

made effective the fight against the morbidity and mortality of cardiovascular diseases that, despite the powerful means of diagnosis and treatment, still kill a lot of people.

His ideology brought him to thinking about future generations that will enjoy of all his remarkable donations to the University of Udine (the 12 000 volumes of the Florio Library, the beautiful Palazzo Antonini-Maseri designed by Andrea Palladio on 1556 and now the official site of the Rector Magnificus), to the Cardiology Department of Udine and Trieste, to the Lyceum, which he attended, and so on. It is worth quoting a few concepts left by Maseri while implementing the Gift Paradigm that: ‘Made in memory of my family members . . . from the deep bonds I have always had with my land . . . a stimulus to lengthen the list of people who, through acts of liberality, contribute to the growth and the development by means of culture, education and health.’

In our experience, Attilio Maseri implemented one of the highest expressions of the Gift Paradigm ever seen in 50 years in the world of research, teaching and patient care. So inspired, anyone can strive to reap from his treasure, since after harvest it is possible to sow for others’ benefit, without keeping goods only for ourselves!

Also, on behalf of those who feel intimidated by his greatness and humility, we warmly express our gratitude to a beautiful teacher whose presence in Medicine will stay forever, not only for his multiple talents but also for the universality of the meta-model put into practice. The great inheritance to be collected by scholars and clinicians, wherever they are, is to work on projects with a strong determination, far-sighted, joyfully and ready to recognize others’ merit when dealing with the advancement of knowledge and with people education.

While sharing with everyone the pain of Maseri’s loss and wishing Attilio a good journey now that, resting in peace among the stars, he has reunited with his Francesca and Filippo (beloved wife and son prematurely lost), we recall what he used to say often to colleagues:

‘We increasingly presume to make our Patients immortal, while our real challenge as Doctors is to improve their Lives.’