In Memoriam of Anna Maria Casazza

Anna Maria Casazza, sadly, passed away at the age of 77 on Nov. 17, 2013.

Irony of the sort, Anna Maria died of cancer, the disease she had studied and fought against all of her professional life.

Anna Maria graduated in biological science from the State University of Milan, where she specialized in virology. She began her career with Farmitalia as a research scientist and was part of the research group which, from the early 1970s, thanks to an agreement between Farmitalia and the Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori di Milano, worked with on-site researchers such as F.C. Giuliani, C. Soranzo, G. Pratesi, F. Formelli, G. Lenaz, A. Gambetta, F. Zunino, and others in the group headed by Aurelio Di Marco. The work was carried out in close contact with oncological and pharmacological clinical scientists of the institute itself: G. Bonadonna, U. Veronesi, S. Monfardini, G. Beretta, E. Bajetta, M. De Lena, P. Valagussa, G. Tancini, and later, R. Canetta, L. Gianni, A. Santoro, and others. Their work was concerned with the study and characterization of the antitumor molecules originally isolated and identified at Farmitalia Research Institute by Aurelio Di Marco and Federico M. Arcamone.

This all came from a “soil micro-organism,” which produced a cardinal red substance that was given the name Adriamycin (doxorubicin): an antitumor antibiotic similar to daunomycin (also called daunorubicin)—discovered earlier by the same Farmitalia group—which delayed the growth of experimental tumors and increased the survival time of animals. To this day, doxorubicin is the antitumor drug with the highest number of therapeutic applications and research aimed at finding analogues have brought about the synthesis and/or study of more than 2,000 molecules, two of which being epirubicin and idarubicin, which demonstrated efficacy and reached regulatory approval.

These Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori di Milano/Farmitalia years were soon to become a “magic moment” in Italian research history and in the fight against cancer in general. The Italian experimental and clinical research advanced as this close collaboration gave its fruits of success year after year in its identification and development of new antineoplastic agents.

In all of this, Anna Maria played a more-than-major role as right-hand woman to Aurelio Di Marco, contributing her invaluable organizational and research skills by coordinating the preclinical research for the identification of new anthracyclines with improved therapeutic activity and safety profiles.

These were also the years when the United States really took on the battle against cancer, introducing the Cancer Act of 1971, and this was the backdrop against which Italian oncology was truly formed and, in this same context, was able to make great contributions to cancer therapies worldwide.

At that time the relationship between Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori di Milano-Farmitalia and the National Cancer Institute in the United States was very close, and Anna Maria was a true ambassador from the side of preclinical research. She had the talent of being able to involve each and every participant in the often heated discussions regarding the studies on structure-activity relationships of the various compounds and their pharmacotoxicological profiles and mechanism of action profiles. Her guidance was recognized by all, as was her lucidity of thought, and this profitable collaboration led to a network of scientific efficacy and real innovation involving the United States and Italy.

In 1984, Anna Maria left Italy for the United States to accept the position of director of preclinical oncology research at Bristol-Myers Squibb and remained there until her retirement. There she worked on the preclinical profiles of paclitaxel, carboplatin, and derivatives. However, even after her retirement Anna Maria continued to work alongside numerous researchers and companies on both sides of the ocean. What is certain is that her move to the United States was a loss for Italy’s oncology research.

Before and during her years in the United States, Anna Maria was a very active member of the AACR through participation on its committees, as well as fostering the role of women in cancer research.
I personally first met Anna Maria in 1970, soon after receiving my degree, when she interviewed me for a fellowship to be assigned by the Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori di Milano. Needless to say, I was lucky enough to obtain the same fellowship and thus start a decennial collaboration, which allowed me to substitute her as head of preclinical oncology for Farmitalia when she moved to the United States. We worked closely together for many years, during which I learned so much from Anna Maria, especially that particular love of research and, before our professional paths parted, we had become and were to remain real friends for more than 40 years, and for this I am truly grateful.

Together with all those who were close to Anna Maria, I shall always remember that wonderful woman with a passion for jazz, any kind of art, and her great love of that special Grecian bay where her home lays overlooking the sea, and where her ashes finally met the wind.

In fond memory,

Fernando C. Giuliani

Friends and colleagues:

Federico M. Arcamone, Renzo Canetta, Cristina Geroni, Mario Ghione, Paolo Lombardi, Carla Manzotti, Gabriella Pezzoni, Claudio Praga, Lella Pratesi, Carla Soranzo, and Monica Tortoreto