

## Obituary

## Vittorio Ventafridda (1927–2008)

Professor Vittorio Ventafridda, a pioneer in cancer pain and palliative care, a role model clinician and researcher, a teacher, a mentor and a dear friend, died on October 23, 2008 at the Hospice Pio Albergo Trivulzo in Milan, Italy. Vittorio had lived for several years after a disabling stroke that limited his physical activities but spared his mind and spirit. Until his death, he continued to work tirelessly to advance the care of patients with pain and with serious life-limiting illnesses.



Vittorio Ventafridda was born in a small town Ragogna, Italy, on October 29, 1927. He was the only child, and his personality and intelligence were evident from his early beginnings. He graduated in Medicine and Surgery from the University of Pavia in 1952 and then began his training in anesthesia at the University of Bologna. In 1955, he came to the United States and completed a rotating internship and anesthesia residency in Chicago at the University of Illinois. He then returned to Milan in 1958 and joined the National Cancer Institute as an anesthesiologist. Those were exciting times for a young clinician/researcher, and he became a member of an elite group of medical and surgical oncologists and researchers at the NCI, who were focused on curing cancer and improving cancer care and treatment. In fact, all these young faculty became internationally recognized for their discoveries in cancer research and cancer care.

By 1967, Vittorio's career focus was pain management and he was appointed as the Director of the Division of Pain Therapy and Rehabilitation at the NCI. He was becoming recognized nationally and internationally as a pioneer in the care and treatment of

patients with cancer and pain. At that time, anesthetic and neurosurgical procedures were the mainstay of treatment for patients with cancer pain, but Vittorio saw the critical role for analgesic drug therapy and began to study non-opioid and opioid analgesics that were becoming rapidly embroiled in the controversial debates about the role of pharmacologic management in the care of the terminally ill patients. He was an early and vociferous advocate for drug therapy, and was initially criticized by his anesthesia colleagues who continued to support procedural pain therapies.

During this time, he became a close friend and collaborator of Dr. John Bonica and was a founding member of the International Association for the Study of Pain. In 1976, with Dr. John Bonica, he organized a cancer pain symposium as a satellite to the First IASP Congress and it was at this meeting with Drs. Robert Twycross, John Bonica, Raymond Houde, Vittorio and me that we all began a long-term collaboration in studying cancer pain. At that meeting, Vittorio clearly articulated a vision for care of the seriously ill and dying patients which was more than just pain management. His innovative ideas and vision embraced the English hospice philosophy and his plan was closely allied with quality cancer treatment which he then modeled at the National Cancer Institute in Milan.

In 1978, with the support of the Floriani Foundation, for which he was the Scientific Director, he organized the First International Conference on Cancer Pain that brought together experts from around the world in cancer pain management. This was the first of numerous symposia, educational meetings and publications on cancer pain and symptom management that Vittorio spearheaded for the next 30 years documenting the incremental developments in the field and reflecting the growing interest in both clinical and research issues in cancer pain and palliative care. These advances were recognized and incorporated at his own institution where he became the Director of the Palliative Care Unit.

In 1980, with Dr. John Bonica, he met Dr. Jan Stjernsward, who was head of the WHO Cancer Unit and by October, 1982, Vittorio organized a WHO Consultation Meeting in Pomerio, Italy, again supported by the Floriani Foundation. The meeting participants prepared draft guidelines on the Methods for the Relief of Cancer Pain. This report represented a consensus of a group of experts on cancer pain management and was based on the newly emerging premise that pharmacological drug therapy was the mainstay of management for pain in cancer patients.

By 1984, a WHO Meeting on the Comprehensive Management of Cancer Pain of which Vittorio was an expert panelist was held in Geneva and the summary report of this meeting was published in the influential monograph "Cancer Pain Relief". This monograph was translated into more than 28 languages, and it promulgated the concept of the WHO "Analgesic Ladder". The implementation of these guidelines became an essential component of the WHO Program in Cancer which requests that each member country

develop a national cancer control program that includes pain relief as one of the major facets. Vittorio and his colleagues then led a major study to field test the guidelines providing important and basic information on the efficacy of Step 1, Step 2 and Step 3 and the overall management of patients with pain and cancer.

In 1989, again as a member of the Expert Panel, Vittorio, at the WHO Expert Committee Meeting, helped to review and officially endorse a broader set of guidelines on teaching and training of healthcare professionals in cancer pain relief and expanded the focus of the WHO Program to include palliative care, publishing the monograph entitled “Cancer Pain Relief and Palliative Care”. During this time, Vittorio’s program at the National Cancer Institute in Milan was named a WHO Collaborating Center and in this capacity he networked with programs around the world to develop and expand clinical pain and palliative care programs.

Vittorio, as a Council Member of IASP, led numerous efforts to closely ally the pain and palliative care communities with the WHO at each of the IASP Congresses. He was a passionate advocate, travelling literally around the world teaching the principles of cancer pain relief and palliative care to those who would listen.

With his many colleagues at the NCI in Milan and throughout Italy, and with the support of the Floriani Foundation, he worked with the Italian League Against Cancer to develop a Volunteer Training School, and to embed the principles and practice of palliative care into quality cancer care creating a unique home-based model of palliative care in the city of Milan. He helped to establish the Italian Association of Palliative Care and the Italian School of Palliative Medicine, and advocated strongly for the development of palliative care units in hospitals throughout Italy and the world.

In 1988, the European Association of Palliative Care was founded, for which he was the driving force, and which now has 44 national association members in 26 European countries and represents more than 50,000 health care professionals working in palliative care.

In his more than 250 publications, he addressed a wide range of clinical research issues and topics; from the description of the role of various anesthetic procedures, such as nerve blocks and cordotomy in cancer pain management, to field testing of the WHO guidelines, to studies on the use of opioids, to models of home-based care, and to specific studies on the complex symptom management in patients with advanced illness.

In all his work, he remained a fierce advocate for pain relief and palliative care in children, the elderly and in marginalized

patient populations in low resource countries. In 1994, his WHO Collaborating Center in collaboration with the Livia Benini Foundation sponsored a WHO consultation that led to the development of guidelines and the monograph “Cancer Pain Relief and Palliative Care in Children”. In 1997, with his leadership and collaboration with Dr. Irene Higginson and with the support of the Floriani Foundation, he organized the publications on the “WHO Solid Facts in Palliative Care” and “Better Palliative Care for Older People”. By 1994, he retired from the National Cancer Institute and became a Consultant at the European Institute of Oncology, further expanding his clinical and research efforts.

For those who worked with him, he was a generous yet demanding collaborator, a tireless, tenacious, determined and kind person. For those to whom he was a mentor and teacher, he set high standards yet praised their efforts however small. For his own patients and for patients throughout the world, he was an advocate who fought against the lack of compassion and indifference in care, and called for attention to the suffering of patients and their families.

But it was his endearing personality, his self-effacing manner, his kindness, his openness and his elegance that made him an extraordinary charismatic leader inspiring us all to do better. He gave voice to the importance of managing pain, reducing symptoms, supporting families and consoling the bereaved. He received numerous awards for his efforts, and numerous awards in the field of palliative care bore his name.

He surrounded himself with a group of wonderful collaborators and trainees who helped him to carry out his work. They are a major part of his legacy to the fields of pain and palliative care. Although the list is very long, he would be the first to say that he could not have done what he did without the work and support of Franco DeConno, Carla Ripamonti, Augusto Caraceni, Heidi Blumhuber and so many others, and the generous support and mission of the Floriani Foundation.

Vittorio is survived by his wife Marisa, who was his collaborator in all his efforts and his caregiver in the last years of his life, and by his sons, Paolo and Giorgio, his daughter-in-law, Anna, and his three grandchildren, Susanna, Alberto and Tommaso.

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