

The preparation of an EASL awardee recognition article for Massimo Colombo is a challenging task. It requires the critical selection of all of his many seminal contributions in the field of Hepatology, but also aims to expose his fruitful actions that have had an impact on fellows, colleagues, friends, and especially EASL.

Massimo Colombo was born in 1946 in Vigevano, Italy. He went to Liceo Classico in 1960, in a small city at the periphery of Milan, and in 1965 entered the Medical School at the University of Milan. In 1981 he gained a research position at the Internal Medicine Unit chaired by Professor Nicola Dioguardi and this paved his track in Medicine. Everybody recognizes an expert in viral hepatitis and liver cancer in Massimo Colombo, but one of his major areas of work has been hemophilia and post-transfusion hepatitis, due to the influence of his mentor, Professor PierMannuccio Mannucci. Because of his avidity for knowledge and research, he spent a two year fellowship in the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York when this was a leading “empire” in Hepatology under the guidance of Professor Hans Popper. Fortunately, he returned to his home country and, with his well-known commitment and dedication, he became the Chair of Medicine in 1991 and, ten years later, got the same position at the 1st Division of Gastroenterology: the Fondazione IRCCS Cà Granda Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico, Università degli Studi di Milano. In such a career he has been part of the steering committee of several clinical studies at national and international level, and has also been successful in clinical studies run in his center that have provided relevant insight in the field of liver cancer. With such knowledge, I have had the pleasure to widely interact with him, and properly value the impact he has had. Two examples serve to expose this statement. In 1989 he was the principal investigator who first established the relationship between the infection by hepatitis C virus and the risk of hepatocellular carcinoma. The article was published in the Lancet just 4 pages before the validation study done in Barcelona. Thus, he was first!! A second major hit was the demonstration that hepatocellular carcinoma existed in the West, and that it was a major cause of death in patients with liver cirrhosis (New England Journal of Medicine 1991). At that time, primary liver cancer was presented as an infrequent entity in Europe and for which diagnosis at an early stage was unfeasible, and treatment would not offer survival benefits. These two studies frame what came later during his fruitful career. Through several investigations he acted on two fronts: treatment of viral hepatitis (all viruses, not just HCV) and diagnosis and treatment of hepatocellular carcinoma. The list of publications is easy to trace in PubMed and suffice to say that, at the time of the EASL award, he exhibited an impressive number of publications (>200 in all major journals devoted to Hepatology and Internal Medicine) that have deserved more than 6500 citations, resulting in an H-index of 41.

He has been invited to give lectures in most national and international scientific Associations related to liver diseases, but it is worth highlighting one remarkable achievement: he has been the sole individual to be invited to deliver the same state of the art lecture on the same topic (Hepatocellular Carcinoma) in two separate EASL meetings (1994 and 2008). This proves recognition by peers beyond any doubt!

While this list of achievements reflects a successful career, there is need to reflect on the contributions and service he has done for EASL. He was Associate Editor of the Journal of Hepatology from 1985 to 1990 and was repeatedly member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Hepatology. Ultimately, he became Editor in Chief of our Journal from 1995 to 2000, together with his friends Mario Mondelli and Roberto di Franchis as Co-Editors. They prepared an appealing application when the nomination for Editor was organized as a scientific competition for a Journal that was demanded to grow in international recognition. It was a great pleasure for me to nominate them for the position during my term as EASL Secretary. Ultimately, I was proud of the decision. The Impact Factor of the Journal experienced a jump from 4.7 to 9.4, and this was the priming jump that has continued thereafter. Critical thinking and questioning everything that is exposed or done, or is potentially to be done, is surely the origin of his success in life. Indeed, looking back into childhood pictures (Fig 1) it is easy to recognize such an intellectual profile that is still recognizable even when relaxing and happy with Paola during one of their travels together (Fig 2).

All these achievements have taken place as a result of intense teamwork with colleagues such as Mondelli, Rumi, Lampertico, Sangiovanni, and Aghemo, to name but a few. This has simultaneously allowed the training of fellows that later on have developed successful careers. However, the working profile should not be split from the human picture. Massimo is a family man married to his wife Paola. She has been the family backbone, sharing happiness, travel abroad, and efforts to raise a family. They have had two sons that make them proud and happy, and even more so with the arrival of five grandsons with whom they share time playing tennis, sailing, and traveling, but also watching 'Inter' playing football and winning championships (they defeated Barça and won the European Championship in 2010 undoubtedly to honour Massimo because of his EASL award!).

All those who have shared time with Massimo and ultimately have become friends with him are pleased with his EASL award and applaud him for all the professional and human values that have been summarized here. Furthermore, we hope that these will not stop and he will continue to provide even more service to the liver knowledge and especially to EASL.

Article written by Prof. Jordi Bruix



Fig 1.- Massimo Colombo at school. Note the critical look and the attention paid to the camera. Also note the term “barca” in the back as a prediction of his future sailing activities.



Fig 2.- Massimo Colombo with his wife Paola enjoying travels around the world. Note again that the critical look towards the camera persists despite the warmth of the situation. The picture explains it all.