

## OBITUARY

# Professor Giovanni Nigro (1931-2017)



Giovanni Nigro (born 24 April 1931) died at his home in Naples on 13 October 2017. After graduating in Medicine and Surgery from the University of Naples “Federico II” in 1954 at the age of 23, he was invited to Sweden, where he had the privilege to work with Gunnar Biörck and Hugo Theorell, recipient in 1955 of the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his studies on myoglobin, cytochrome c and the respiratory chain.

At only 29 years of age he became the youngest Professor of Internal Medicine in Italy, and a few years later was also appointed Professor of Clinical Biochemistry. Following his return from Sweden until his retirement, he worked tirelessly at the University of Naples, first as an unpaid teaching assistant, then as Professor of Special Medical Pathology and later Professor of Therapy.

During his long academic career, he served in key roles on the Department Council, the Department Executive Board, and the University Council, contributing to the drafting of the Statute of the Second University of Naples – now the University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli” – with a true and increasingly rare spirit of public service.

His interest in muscle diseases stemmed from an encounter with a young girl suffering from a muscle disorder while working as a university teaching assistant.

In 1961, he attended a conference on muscular diseases in Trieste – organized by a patient – after reading about it in the newspaper. There, he learned of the Italian Union for the Fight against Muscular Dystrophy (UILDM) and returned to Naples determined to set up a local branch of the association to help families of affected children. Over the following years he served as National President of the UILDM from 1979 to 1986, and chaired its Medical-Scientific Committee from 1984 to 1990.

In 1971 he opened the first rehabilitation center in Campania for patients with muscle conditions, carrying out the last request of a dystrophic boy who had entrusted him with the entire contents of his piggy bank. Named in memory of the boy, the Gaetano Torre Center for Muscular Diseases is still running today, and over the years has supported about 70 families, helping unemployed parents of children with muscular dystrophy.

In 1976 he set up first Center of Cardiomyology and Myology at the Naples University Hospital, which went on to become a multi-specialty department in 1980.

In 1981 he organized the first international meeting on muscle diseases in Naples, attended by world-renowned researchers in the field.

In 1985 he invited Prof. Yves Rideau from the University of Poitiers to Naples University so that young Italian Duchenne patients might benefit from his innovative surgical-orthopedic therapy.

In 1989, as Chair of the UILDM’s Medical-Scientific Commission, he imported the Téléthon event run by the French Association against Myopathies (AFM) to Italy, inaugurating the very first Italian Telethon Marathon, now in its 28th year.

He was one of the founder members of the European Neuromuscular Centre, set up in 1992, and served on both

its Executive and Research Committees, later becoming one of the organization's honorary members.

In 1993 he established the Mediterranean Society of Myology (MSM) in Ischia, uniting members from 22 different countries, with the aim of bringing together experts in striated muscle diseases and neuromuscular disorders from across the Mediterranean area, fostering collaborative medical and biological research, holding scientific meetings, sponsoring a journal for the publication of scientific papers, and creating a Mediterranean-wide medical network for muscle diseases.

In 1995 he established the "Gaetano Conte Prize" in honor of the Neapolitan physician who in 1836 – 32 years before Duchenne de Boulogne – first described two patients with muscle degeneration. The prize is awarded to distinguished scientists working in the field of muscular dystrophies. In the same year he set up the World Muscle Society (WMS) in Bologna together with Victor Dubowitz and Luciano Merlini, and was one of the founder members of the Italian Association of Myology (AIM), created in 2000.

His name is inextricably linked with ground-breaking research in the field of cardiomyology – a term he himself coined – having first underlined how the heart may be a primary site of the dystrophic process in Duchenne patients. This was in 1976, 10 years before the discovery of the dystrophin gene. He was also one of the first to report cardiac involvement in Duchenne and Becker carriers, and heart disease as a major cause of death in numerous muscle disorders, such as myotonic dystrophies

and Emery Dreifuss muscular dystrophies, if not properly diagnosed and treated.

Prof. Nigro remained active for many years after his retirement, working as editor-in-chief of the journal *Acta Myologica* and organizing conferences – including the World Federation of Neurology Congress in Naples in 2010, and MSM meetings in 2011, 2013 and 2015. The upcoming 13th MSM conference will be held in Cappadocia, Turkey, on 27-29 June 2018, and is dedicated to his memory.

He also continued to be actively involved in running the rehabilitation center he himself created, working on a voluntary basis as Medical Director until April 2016, as well as the G. Torre Association, where he served as an honorary member up until the day before his death.

On a more personal level, Prof. Nigro will be remembered for his quick wit, his ability to make light of difficult situations, his optimism, his capacity to come back stronger after each setback, his immediate empathy with patients and their families, and his pioneering approach. He was in no way jealous of his ideas or insights, and would always stress the importance of disseminating ideas, not their authorship.

Prof. Nigro leaves behind a great legacy, and his memory will live on among the tens of thousands of people – students, colleagues, patients and friends – who had the privilege of knowing him. We can only thank him for everything he taught us.

*Luisa Politano and Vincenzo Nigro*

The Pacini family and the editorial staff of Pacini Editore wish to remember Professor Giovanni Nigro for his precious collaboration in the realization of the Journal *Acta Myologica*.

His profound devotion as Editor-in-Chief affirmed the Journal as a high-profile scientific periodical in the national and international field.

His professionalism and correctness have allowed us to work in full harmony enriching our editorial experience.

It was always a pleasure to welcome him to our Company in Pisa.

Patrizia Pacini  
Managing Director  
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