

Vail Professor Umberto Veronesi MD OMRI

Born 28th November 1925, Milan Italy

Died 8th November 2016, Milan Italy

Known and admired by all in the global cancer community, the surgeon Umberto Veronesi was a pioneer of modern breast cancer treatment. The ultimate urbane and cultured Italian gentleman, he was one of the greatest names in clinical breast cancer research of the 20th century.

Qualifying in the early 1950's in Milan, Professor Veronesi became a trail blazer in research which opened up modern treatment for women with breast cancer. In 1981 the Milan 1 trial demonstrated the safety of breast conserving treatment for women with early breast cancer, meaning many could forgo what was then the accepted treatment of a radical Halstead mastectomy. He went on to pioneer sentinel node biopsy, now standard treatment throughout the world, and a more minimal approach that has saved countless women from developing lymphedema. His work in intra-operative radiotherapy also challenged dogma about how to treat early breast cancer. He was instrumental in trials of prevention medication, the results of which have just come to fruition in Australia with the listing of Tamoxifen on the PBS as a cancer prevention drug on October 1 this year.

In 1994 he founded the European Institute of Oncology in Milan as a model for cancer care and research. It has acted as a training hub for many cancer surgeons, medical oncologists, pathologists and others around the world ever since. Professor Veronesi also headed up many of the world's leading cancer agencies: the UICC until 1982, the EORTC from 1985 to 1988, the Federation of European Cancer Societies from 1992-1993, and more recently he set up the Fondazione Veronesi to promote "Science for Peace".

Hand in hand with his clinical and research career (and over 790 publications) he was a champion for public health. As Italian Minister of Health between April 2000 and June 2001, he campaigned against tobacco, attempting to make public spaces in Italy smoke free. As an active supporter of euthanasia and access to opioids for end of life care; and as a promoter of healthy lifestyles – a vegetarian and atheist himself, he always said he had no fear of death, that it was merely a natural process. His last message via his Foundation was "to continue, because the world needs science and reason". Professor Veronesi was also a champion for the role of breast care nurses and instrumental in establishment of the patient advocacy movement in Europe.

Professor Veronesi died on Wednesday surrounded by his family at home in Milan. His presence in the world of breast cancer will be missed but his legacy will live on.