

Umberto Fox

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History and contributions of Prof. Fox

I met Umberto Fox when, as a student, when I attended the department of Prof. Walter Montorsi at the Fatebenefratelli Hospital in Milan, before the team moved to the Policlinico. The figure of this young surgeon who, at the age of 29, had become the supervisor of the emergency surgical ward of one of the most important hospitals in Milan was already a myth for the students and young assistants of Montorsi. He was introduced to me as *the one who had been in the United States and who knew how to tie knots with one finger*. That was true and I was immediately fascinated. Tall, elegant, smart, cultured, he charmed people at the first meeting. He was born in Vicenza on March 27, 1943, and never met his father because he had died in World War II flying in Greece. He lived in Sesto San Giovanni, like me, and perhaps it is for that reason that we bonded immediately. After graduation, he attended the Zonda Pavilion with Prof. Edmondo Malan, working as his assistant. But it was Prof. Montorsi who hired him as assistant and *parked* him at the Fatebenefratelli emergency surgical ward, and later brought him to the Policlinico with him. Then I knew that he dedicated to experimental microsurgery, which he had learned from Prof. Sun Lee at La Jolla,

California, and that he used the stables of the Zonda Pavilion for his experiments on rats.

After my graduation, in 1974, when he was Rapporteur of my thesis, I helped him to organize the first Italian course of experimental microsurgery, held by Sun Lee in person at the Mario Negri Institute. Orthotopic and heterotopic liver transplantation, pancreas-duodenum transplantation, lung-heart transplantation, and portacaval anastomosis were the procedures demonstrated by Sun Lee and Umberto, which were then repeated by their students. This course was later published in a treaty on experimental microsurgery by Minerva Medica in 1975. But the scientific curiosity of Prof. Fox went far beyond all this.

In 1974-75 Prof. Fox went to the University of Minnesota to study metabolic surgery (partial jejuno-ileal bypass for the treatment of severe hyperlipidemia) with Henry Buchwald. In 1976, he conceived the pampiniform-saphenous anastomosis procedure, that still bears his name, for the treatment of varicocele. He then carried out the first testicular autotransplantation in Italy in a patient with cryptorchidism. In 1986, he dedicated to the segmental transplantation of pancreas and kidney and developed the technique for the solution of vascular problems after extracorporeal membrane oxygenation.

In the lymphological field, he carried out the first lymphatic-venous anastomosis in Italy with the Degni technique, partially modified. After a trip to Shanghai, inspired by the limb warming technique for lymphedema practiced by the Chinese for hundreds of years and designing a microwave thermotherapy device that he used for years

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with remarkable results (Figure 1).

All his activities are described in over 200 printed works, including monographs. The walls of his office were covered with awards and diplomas awarded to him by



Figure 1. The oven the device for the thermotherapy of lymphedema.



Figure 2. First theoretical-practical course in liver resection surgery with the digito-classic technique organized in collaboration with the surgeon Lin Yang Tzen.

prestigious Universities and Research Centers. Despite this considerable amount of work, he was denied access to a university career. For that reason he clashed with his master, Prof. Montorsi, and accepted a transfer to the Garbagnate Milanese hospital, where meanwhile I had continued my hospital career and where I met him again. Here he organized the 18th GEL Congress (*Group Européen de Lymphologie*) together with the friends Olszewski, Leduc, Dubernard and Foldi. He organized microsurgery courses with the Australian Bernard O'Brian and Marco Lanzetta by using the hospital premises where he had set up an experimental microsurgery laboratory. The course in liver resection surgery with his friend Lin Yang Tzen, a Shanghai surgeon who used the digitoclastic technique, has remained in history (Figure 2).

Fox also devoted resources and studies

to the treatment of protein-losing enteropathy by treating patients with severe chylous ascites and extreme hypoproteinemias that nobody had wanted to treat until then. I remember the amazement of the audience and the curiosity aroused in the attendees at the World Congress of Gastroenterology in Los Angeles when I presented, on his behalf, the report on these treatments.

He was a curious person; when he would find an interesting subject, he started studying it and, in a short time, he would become an expert and an innovator in that field. Then, when he had understood everything, he would lose interest in that subject and set out seeking new stimuli and dedicating himself to other research topics.

He was an extraordinary surgeon who operated with quick gestures, having a quick thought and excellent manual skills, combined with extreme synthesis, and

could transform even the most complex procedure into a simple one. He was an excellent teacher, who made sure that his techniques could be learnt and used and one who left a wide space of independence to his collaborators, perhaps correcting some wrong attitude, always with calm and elegance, without ever raising his voice, but always with a presence that would be clearly sensed, as he was confident and offered his help in case of need. He was a great scholar and a great teacher, but also a man who knew how to enjoy life. Unfortunately his life ended too early, at 61, after a hepatitis C contracted at the operative bed, which rapidly evolved into cirrhosis and required liver transplantation. This gave him a little period of health, but then a sudden cardiac arrest took him away on May 19th, 2005.