INTERVIEW

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Pain Management

The development of pain medicine in Italy and the rest of Europe 40 years after the first International Association for the Study of Pain Congress

Professor Giustino Varrassi^{*,1,2} and Antonella Paladini³ speak to Jade Parker, Commissioning Editor:

Professor Giustino Varrassi is Full Professor of Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine in the LUDeS University, Valletta, Malta. He graduated at the Medical School of the University 'La Sapienza' (Rome, Italy) in 1973, and became board certified in Anesthesiology and Intensive Care in 1976 and in Pneumology in 1978, both in the same Medical School. He is currently President of the European League Against Pain and of the Paolo Procacci Foundation, and is a founding member of both of these. He is also a member of the World Institute of Pain, and a member of the Board of the Associazione Italiana per lo Studio del

Dolore. He has been an invited speaker at more than 500 congresses (national and international), mainly in obstetric anesthesia and pain medicine. He is also the author of approximately 500 papers, published in international and national scientific journals, and 46 book chapters, mainly on obstetric anesthesia and pain medicine. He is the editor of 31 books and congress proceedings, including a textbook on obstetric anesthesia. He has also been the organizer of around 40 congresses, including European and World congresses on Pain Medicine.

Professor Antonella Paladini is an Assistant Professor of Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine at the L'Aquila University, Italy. She has recently been nominated as Associate Professor of Anesthesiology in the LUDeS University, in Valletta, Malta. She graduated in medicine at L'Aquila University in 1989, and has got her Board Certification with laude in Anesthesia in 1992 and served as anesthetist in few teaching hospitals, mainly in cardiac surgery departments. Since 2000, she is in charge of the L'Aquila University, and has addressed her interests toward pain medicine. In 2004, she got the Board Certificate in

Pain Medicine, with laude, in the University of Verona. She has a huge scientific production, with over 60 papers published in international and national journals. She is especially interested in the phenomenon of neuroinflammation and pain, and has published interesting review articles and meta-analysis on the topic. She has also co-authored few chapters of international books.

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Q You recently presented at the 'IASP 1975–2015: 40 years later' conference. Can you tell us about the history of this conference?

• **G Varrassi & A Paladini**

The first International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) conference held in Florence (Italy) in 1975 originated from John J Bonica, a pioneer in bringing the study of pain management to the forefront of people's minds. At the beginning of the 1970s, he put together a group of scientists from all across the world involved in the study of pain including anesthesiologists, biologists, internists, neurosurgeons, pharmacologists, physiologists, psychologists, among others, who studied both the physical and psychological aspects of pain. During one of these meetings, organized in Florence by Paolo Procacci in April 1972, it was decided that a new meeting would be held the following year in the USA. This meeting was set up and held in Issaquah (WA, USA) and was devoted to the establishment of a scientific and professional association. The 342 scientists present there decided to name their new association as IASP. The basic motivation was very clear: the mission of the association was to become the meeting point for all those who wished to have a clearer idea on the phenomenon of pain, no matter of their cultural background or geographical origin. They also decided to have the first IASP congress in Florence, in September 1975. This congress was fully organized by Paolo Procacci and his colleagues, and historically remains the first world congress on pain.

Since the first IASP congress, the field of pain medicine has seen a huge global evolution. 40 years after this first IASP conference, two leading pain scientists (Anna Maria Aloisi and Giancarlo Carli) decided to organize a ceremony in memory of the original conference. The title of this conference was very simple and appealing, 'IASP 1975–2015: 40 years later.' Attendees of this conference included Fernando Cervero (Past President of IASP), Manfred Zimmermann (Past President of EFIC), few members of the local organizing committee of the First IASP Congress, some of the members of the initial organization of the Italian IASP Chapter (Associazione Italiana per lo Studio del Dolore [AISD]), and myself.

Q What were the highlights of this session?

• **G Varrassi & A Paladini**

Highlights of this conference included the

opening presentation by Giancarlo Carli who described the rich history of the congress. Being a participant at the first IASP congress, Carli was able to provide firsthand information of the events that took place.

Following this, Professor Manfred Zimmermann, another participant at the first IASP Congress and Founding Member of IASP, provided a historical overview of the evolution of Pain Medicine and Research, with a focus on what was the 'state of the art' during the first IASP Congress. He also highlighted the important translational data that have been acquired by the researchers and transmitted to the clinical practice over the last 40 years.

My presentation, immediately after, has been mainly focused on the developments made by the European Pain Medicine. I was fortunate enough, because I was one of the founding members of the European Federation of IASP Chapters (EFIC), in August 1993, in Paris. Therefore, I have lived all these developments, especially as an organizer of the first EFIC Congress in Verona (1995), together with Stefano Ischia (an Italian celebrity of Pain Management), and as member of the EFIC Executive Board for 21 years (1993–2014).

The first part of the meeting organized by Aloisi and Carli was closed by Fernando Cervero, Past President of IASP who reinforced the crucial messages spread from IASP since its beginning. He also presented all the initiatives that the IASP has implemented. He concluded by showing the advancements that have been made based on research and the multidisciplinary study of pain phenomenon.

The second part of the meeting, chaired by Anna Maria Aloisi, Giancarlo Carli and Mario Pappagallo (a well-known scientific journalist, who has worked in the *Corriere della Sera* for many years), was completely devoted to the field of pain medicine in Tuscany. Important colleagues working in that Italian Region, including Roberta Casali, Pierangelo Geppetti, Marco Maresca, Andrea Messeri, Renato Vellucci, reported their experiences. All of them presented the incredible evolution that pain medicine has had in the past years and they unanimously agreed on the importance of the first IASP Congress held in Florence had helped in the 'fertilization' of an already fertile ground, derived from the initial work carried out

in the field of pain medicine by individuals such as Professor Lunedei, Professor Teodori, Professor Sicuteri and Professor Procacci.

The ceremony has been closed with a touching presentation of Mrs Procacci (the wife of Paolo Procacci) who thanked for the initiative and reminded the attendees of the historical event that first took place in 1975 at the first congress.

Q Is there a particular achievement you are most proud of in your career so far?

• **G Varrassi**

I have been working academically, scientifically and clinically, at the beginning as Anesthesiologist, but since 1985 almost exclusively as Pain Clinician. This has been the most rewarding aspect of my professional life. The thankful eyes of a pain patient who is relieved of his/her sufferance is definitely the best professional achievement for a physician. This was the initial message of John Bonica, and I am very happy and proud. Happy because I have had the opportunity to perceive the importance of such a crucial message and proud because I have succeeded.

Q You have also been the President of the Italian Association for the Study of Pain, in your opinion what effects have this organization had on study of pain management in Italy?

• **G Varrassi**

AISD was one of the first IASP Chapters in the world. In Italy it represents the only scientific multidisciplinary association for those interested in the study of pain, including the clinical studies. AISD has still now a pivotal effect on the Italian evolution of Pain Medicine, and is very well connected with the rest of Europe and all the other European IASP Chapters. In such a function, it has been one of the founding members of the European Federation of IASP Chapters (EFIC), in 1993. AISD has also represented, and represents, the most important Italian scientific society working in favor of the pain patients. Certainly it represents a driving scientific force, full of key opinion leaders, excellent clinicians and superb scientists.

Q You are also the President of the European League Against Pain, what achievements has this committee had & what has been your role?

• **G Varrassi**

At the end of my permanence in the EFIC Executive Board, the colleagues still in that

committee asked me to serve EFIC as liaison with the European Union Institutions (Commission and Parliament). I had been working in that area for many years before, lobbying for Pain Medicine, and trying to sensitize the European Politicians in the interest of the Pain Patients. One of the most important initiative organized in that direction has been the annual symposium: 'Societal Impact of Pain', started in 2010, and still active at the moment. As EFIC President, I also had expanded the interests for Pain Medicine in other countries, for example, in Russia, where I helped to launch an initiative named ManagePain. Also this is still active at the moment, and their last meeting had over 3000 delegates. During all those years I had realized the importance of Pain Patients organizations, working together with the scientific societies, to obtain the maximum effect possible. During the summer 2014, together with few colleagues we decided to establish a new initiative, the European League Against Pain. This was first aimed to expand the interests also to other than just the European IASP Chapters, also including Pain Patients representatives, and Professional representatives, for example, the Union of the Anesthesiologists. In other terms, it was aimed to increase the number of 'actors' officially present at the meetings organized inside of the European Union Institutions. We had ingenuously thought this would have been possible with EFIC. Unfortunately, this was not the case, till now. Anyway, European League Against Pain is working very much, still in the interests of pain patients, organizing meetings and symposia that highlight the importance of a good management for those who suffer from pain.

Q As one of the founding members of the European Federation of the IASP Chapters, how in your opinion has the field of pain management changed over the last decade?

• **G Varrassi**

The EFIC still represents an important scientific institution for the study of pain, supporting IASP and its initiatives. As previously said, its first congress was organized in Verona in May 1995 by Professor Stefano Ischia and myself. It has been and still is a crucial driver in the promotion of the IASP messages throughout Europe, stimulating enthusiasm on scientific topics previously ignored in the majority of European countries.

The EFIC has also made important initiatives in favor of young scientists, promoting education

and research, especially for the colleagues in the eastern part of Europe, and always following the inputs delivered through IASP material.

Q Can you explain the importance of this conference in remembering the work of pioneering pain management researchers?

• **G Varrassi**

Many of us are very grateful to the two organizers. From time to time we read about historical events that are almost forgotten. On the contrary, it is necessary to make clear the history of important events, and write about the real sequences of the important topics, in order to give the right light to people who strongly contributed to the evolution of science. John J Bonica and Paolo Procacci are definitely two of these individuals. They built the foundations of a new science: algology, and made easier to relieve the suffering of our patients. They also believed that the solution for complex health problems can come solely from basic research, education and a multidisciplinary approach. Clinicians should never forget these messages, if they really want to succeed with their patient necessities.

Q You recently published a review on 'Chronic Pain in the Elderly: The Case for New Therapeutic Strategies' could you speak to this issue & to the findings?

• **G Varrassi**

That paper was the consequence of a casual meeting of my group and me with colleagues involved in the study of pain mechanisms. One of the interesting aspects discussed during the different meetings we had with them was the emerging importance of the neuro-inflammatory processes, but also the crucial role played by the 'non-neuronal' part of the nervous system. In particular, looking at the literature, glia and mast cells seem much more important than it was thought in the past. Actually, that review article has highlighted few of the mechanisms involved in the pain perception, in the 'chronification' of pain, and in the sensitization of the nervous system, also after short-term pain.

Q What plans do you have for further investigation & research in the future?

• **G Varrassi**

At the personal level, I will continue to diffuse the messages emerging by all the open frontiers

to fight pain and suffering. Certainly many of those new concepts would deserve a better diffusion, from the scientific point of view. We also have different frontiers other than therapy that should be better understood and diffused. For example, 6 years ago Italy had promulgated a very advanced law, in favor of pain patients. It is surprising, as made clear by recent data, how poorly understood and known that law is.

From the scientific and clinical point of view, I understand that pain therapy, even after so many years, is still limited to two main drug classes: NSAIDs and opioids. We do have the necessity to focus better on different mechanisms. The important role of the glia and mast cells previously mentioned is one of them. At the moment there is lots of data on the clear role played by the Trpm receptors, and/or the system of the complement. Those paths should and must be better studied to see if they may influence the pain therapy in the future. I am very enthusiastic about this, and I am working in that direction, with some group of colleagues involved in basic research.

Q Do you have a particular message to our readership or the general clinical community?

• **G Varrassi**

Just one, very simple: do not forget your mission to relieve pain and suffering in your patients. This should be the main mission for any single physician, even when they would not be completely involved solely in pain management. The gratefulness of their eyes is rewarding much more than any amount of money.

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