

The idea of creating a “[European School of Oncology](#)” came to Umberto Veronesi in the mid-1970s, when the Americans announced the effective implementation of the strategic plan against cancer signed by President Nixon in 1973, the National Cancer Act. He presented his project for the first time in 1981 at the General Assembly of ESSO in Lausanne.

The United States believed then that if they had managed to land on the moon, they could also conquer cancer, because they believed it was just a matter of investment and organization. Instead of dispersing investments among individual states, they concentrated all resources in a single federal research institute, the legendary NCI (National Cancer Institute), headquartered in Bethesda, a suburb of Washington.

The influx of government investment was so massive that within a few years, Bethesda became the world capital of cancer research and began to drain brainpower from every corner of the planet.

The Europeans lacked the political and administrative structure to do the same (the Brussels Commission was infinitely weaker than it is today in terms of coordinating investments), but European oncologists understood the message, especially because they had been making significant contributions to cancer research in those years. The British and French were far ahead in the development of new drugs, but the Italians also played their part, discovering the most powerful anti-tumor drug for breast cancer, Adriamycin, produced by Farmitalia; inventing the concept of adjuvant chemotherapy (Gianni Bonadonna) and revolutionizing breast cancer surgery by confirming the possibility of conserving the breast (Umberto Veronesi, 1980).

Talk began of joining forces and creating a “European oncology”. The British immediately got started, creating the main communication tool, a monthly journal called the “European Journal of Cancer,” which quickly became the main point of reference for the publication of the most important scientific results. The French, Belgians, Dutch, and Italians (Silvio Garattini) established a joint clinical research center in Brussels, the [EORTC](#) (European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer), which has just celebrated its 60th anniversary. The Germans offered the Heidelberg laboratories to host the [EMBO](#) (European Molecular Biology Organization), which concentrated much of the experimental research and led its leader, Harold zur Hausen, to the Nobel Prize for the discovery of the viral origin (human papillomavirus) of certain types of cancer.

Veronesi immediately understood that Italy was in danger of remaining too far behind in this process of “Europeanization” of oncology, and he was quick to propose the establishment of a European School. Everyone recognized Italy as having created the first medical universities (Padua, Bologna, Pavia).

The final push, as often happens, came from a woman. The Roman Princess Laudomia (Domietta) Del Drago discovered only after arriving in London for surgery that Milan was the place where she could be treated while preserving her breast. It was the same English surgeon, very honest, who advised her to return home. Everything went well, and when Domietta asked Veronesi what he could do to “Repay her debt,” Umberto told her of his dream of a European School of Oncology.

As a worldly woman, Domietta Del Drago immediately approved the initiative, donated the first 200 million lire to get it started, and signed before a notary in October 1982 the constitution of a non-profit association called the European School of Oncology (ESO).

The foundation was joined by English radiotherapist Michael Peckham, Belgian urologist Louis Denis, Dutch oncologist Bob Pinedo, and the leader of Swiss oncology, Franco Cavalli.

The first pilot course was held a couple of years later at Pomerio castle on Lake Como. Veronesi was

very keen on the concept of “residential” teaching and wanted teachers and students to spend as much time together as possible to ensure the maximum “transfer of knowledge” from one brain to the other, as Umberto used to say.

The rest is history, and in a few years, in 2031, ESO will celebrate its 50th anniversary. The legacy of the Necchi Campiglio family ensures its full financial independence and makes the School the only European oncology training institution completely independent of any form of commercial sponsorship.

ESO’s alumni now number over 15,000, many of whom are members of its Alumni College, and many have since become directors of oncology departments or even institute directors. The School has always made every effort to maintain gender equality among its students, a multidisciplinary approach (surgeons, radiologists, physicians, psychologists, nurses, pathologists, etc.), and an equal distribution between the Western and Eastern parts of the Old Continent.

From the very beginning, ESO’s motto has been “learning to care,” indicating its firm commitment to teaching human medicine and not just the treatment of the disease. This was always the will of its founder and creator, Umberto Veronesi, who dedicated every possible effort and attention to the School until the end of his days.