

Celebrating Public Health Lives: Prof Giovanni Bo, Hygienist and Rector*

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Prof. Giovanni Bo

Dear Colleagues, Pupils, Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank President Ferro, the Board, the Scientific Committee of the Italian Society for Hygiene, Preventive Medicine, and Public Health and the Central and Local Organizing Committees of the 54th Congress, for allowing me his

first academic student and mentee, to remember Prof Giovanni Bo, who passed away at the age of 98 on 12 May 2021, in Pavia. My short speech during the opening ceremony shares the sentiments, I am sure, of all those he worked with at the University, and of the many more members of the large community of Italian Hygienists.

* The speech was delivered at the opening ceremony of the 54th Congress of the Italian Society of Hygiene, Preventive Medicine, and Public Health – Lecce, 3 November 2021

Piedmontese from Monferrato, Giovanni Bo was born on 25 July 1923 and, following high school in classical disciplines, he attended the School of Medicine and Surgery at Pavia University as a student at Ghislieri College, graduating with honors in 1951.

After a few months as voluntary Assistant to the chairs of Comparative Anatomy and of Anthropology at the University of Pavia, in 1953 he was appointed tenured Assistant, and later Assistant, at the Institute of Hygiene headed by Prof. Luigi Checcacci.

He became a Lecturer in Hygiene in 1959; he also taught Medical Statistics until 1964/65 and was awarded a scholarship at the Pasteur Institute in Lille.

Following his success in the University of Catania's public selection for Professors of Hygiene in 1964, he was hired as an Adjunct Professor by the School of Medicine of the University of Cagliari, succeeding Giuseppe Brotzu.

In 1966 he moved to the School of Medicine of the University of Sassari, succeeding Bruno Angelillo, who had been hired by the University of Naples. He remained there for 11 years, dedicating himself wholeheartedly to the many tasks that the role required of him and developing an admirable interest and affection for the island of Sardinia, a Region whose reality and needs were so different from those of the places he had come from.

In the Fifties, Sardinia - which had just eradicated malaria and dramatically reduced the morbidity rate of diseases caused by economic backwardness - was still dealing with serious unresolved public health problems and was in search of a developmental model for the future, torn between agriculture, tourism and large-scale industry. Despite its many contradictions, the great *Piano di Rinascita* (Rebirth Plan), approved by the State and the Region, to which the tenured-professors of Hygiene in Sardinian Universities (Brotzu, Marginesu, Angelillo)

and the hygienists in the local public health services had greatly contributed, was in full implementation.

The new, young Director of the *Istituto di Igiene di Sassari* (a brand new institute, conceived by Angelillo and named after Prof Marginesu), enthusiastically accepted his many duties both old and new.

He established valuable scientific and operational working relationships with public administrators, many other Institutes of all the Schools of the University, and the Sardinian Zooprophylactic Institute. He set up the Post-Graduate School of Hygiene and Preventive Medicine to enable the instruction and training of a new generation of public health officers in Northern Sardinia. The *Istituto* became the driving force behind the introduction of anti-tuberculosis and anti-rubella vaccinations; the coordination of the health surveillance of over 10,000 workers at the Porto Torres petrochemical plant, who were exposed to particular risks; the *Istituto* carried out intense public health disclosure activities, providing scientific information and health education through the local press; it inspired and organized training and refresher courses for healthcare personnel and school teachers; it provided scientific and technical advice to the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* (Bank for the South) and the municipalities of northern Sardinia on monitoring the quality of mains water; it acted as a centralized clinical diagnostic laboratory for the University Clinics.

As president of the '*Groupe international d'études sur les examens systematiques en Médecine Préventive et en Médecine thérapeutique*', Professor Bo had the Province of Sassari set up the *Centre for Preventive and Social Medicine*, to provide a free laboratory, instrumental diagnosis and clinical multi-specialist activities, at the service of the new primary care physicians.

He was Rector of the University in 1970-71, a position he left when the University of Sassari (like all Italian universities at that

time) was subject to violence and protests: "My academic career led me to encounters, not clashes, for which I felt completely unprepared," he said.

His scientific production is vast and his studies on the hygienic problems of water supply, on the health conditions of the seas (at a time when an increasingly rapid development of tourism was taking place), on the hygienic and sanitary conditions of the urban environment, on atmospheric pollution, on the relationship between food and health, on the epidemiology and prophylaxis of diseases of social interest, and on healthcare organization, are all extremely noteworthy.

Because of his in-depth knowledge of Sardinian healthcare, he was part of the small group of experts responsible for drawing up the first Regional Health Plan.

Professor Bo deserves the merit of having created in Sassari a School that for almost 50 years has held high the prestige of Hygiene, both scientific and technical, in the academic field and in the territory, and that has always seen him as an authoritative *Maestro*, even after his transfer to other academic locations. And in this context, numerous recognitions and positions have been held by his *alumni*: Rector of the University, Dean of Schools and Rectoral Delegate, Head of Degree courses and of Inter-Departmental bodies, member of the National Health Council, president and secretary of scientific societies, Health Directors of hospital and Officers of Local Health Authorities.

In 1977 - after 12 years of Sardinian life - Prof. Bo moved to Perugia: he became the Director of the Post-Graduate School of Hygiene and continued his studies and intense teaching activity. However, due to the different organization and scientific interests of the Institute of Hygiene of that University he was unable to guarantee, for that period, a continuation of the technical-practical activity that had previously characterized his academic work.

In 1982 he finally moved again, to take

the Professorship of Hygiene at the School of Medicine in Pavia, after the sudden death of his mentor Prof. Checcacci, thus concluding the pilgrimage in stages that brought him from his first academic position in Pavia, throughout Italy, back to his *Alma Mater*.

From 1983 to 1989 he was appointed Dean of the Medical School and took the additional position of substitute teacher of Hygiene in the newly-established School of Medicine of Varese, a brand new University, "daughter" of Pavia, by far the oldest in Lombardy.

These were years of intense academic activity in a period characterized by major transformations in the university system: the autonomy of universities, the institution of the three teaching ranks (Researcher, Associate Professor, Full Professor), the reform of selection criteria for professorship, the application of the health reform, the new National Health Service-University relations; events that Prof. Bo generously participated in, in the bodies he was a member of.

He was awarded by the President of the Republic the gold medal for merits in the field of culture, education and art, and the honor of *Commendatore*.

His speeches at the Congresses of the Italian Society for Hygiene, Preventive Medicine, and Public Health were rich in science and always purposeful. The 36th National Congress in Sassari/Alghero was in some way, on the threshold of his retirement, a celebration of him by the "Hygiene Family". After his retirement, he did not cease his studies and research, participating in the life of his beloved *Istituto*, which by then had become a Department.

Privately, life was not kind to him: it denied him the joy of fatherhood and - when he was still young, - of being with his beloved wife Angela, who passed away prematurely in 1987.

By unanimous decision of the Academic Senate of Sassari, the Lecture hall in which for 11 years he had delivered fascinating

lessons on hygiene, often enriched by learned literary quotations and ancient history, of which he was an expert and knowledgeable scholar, is now named "Lecture Hall Prof. Giovanni Bo, Hygienist and Rector".

From my heart, from his mentees and – I am sure – from all the great Family of Hygienists active in the Academia and in the National Health Service: THANK YOU, PROFESSOR!