

OBITUARY

In memory of Professor Roberto Ronchetti

Professor Roberto Ronchetti was a true master of Pediatrics and Pediatric Pulmonology.

He was our mentor, as well as the mentor of many colleagues who trained in the Fourth Chair of Pediatric Medicine at Sapienza University of Rome, which he directed for many years.

His scientific interests in pediatric pulmonology were remarkably broad, encompassing nuclear medicine with ventilation-perfusion lung scintigraphy, respiratory physiology, respiratory physiotherapy, sleep medicine and long-term ventilation, rare respiratory diseases, congenital malformations of the respiratory tract, and infectious respiratory diseases, foremost among them bronchiolitis caused by Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV). Bronchial asthma and recurrent wheezing were also major areas of research within his school, leading to numerous influential publications, including pioneering work on asthma self-management.

In the later years of his professional career, he turned his attention to one of the greatest emerging challenges to children's health: the impact of environmental pollution and environmental change.

Professor Ronchetti was one of the founders of the European Pediatric Respiratory Society (EPRS), which later became part of the European Respiratory Society (ERS). He encouraged nearly all of his trainees to spend time in leading research centers in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France. He also established long-standing collaborative projects with Poland, particularly with the Mother and Child Health Center in Rabka. He founded the Pediatric Bronchopneumology Study Group within the Italian Society of Pediatrics, bringing together the country's leading experts in the field. The group developed some of the first national consensus statements in pediatric pulmonology, addressing topics such as oxygen therapy, aerosol therapy, and the treatment of childhood asthma. This initiative played a fundamental role in establishing modern pediatric pulmonology and promoting its development throughout Italy.

When we trained in his department, inhaled salbutamol – now universally recommended by international guidelines – was still rarely used. His determination to promote its use by inhalation was instrumental in changing clinical practice.

His intellectual curiosity constantly drove him to explore new frontiers. He recognized the potential of lung ultrasound at a time when its application was still considered pioneering. He promoted pulmonary function testing in infants, advanced the use of cardiopulmonary exercise testing, and fostered the development of pediatric bronchoscopy and bronchoalveolar lavage analysis, techniques that are now standard practice but were then available in only a few specialized centers. As early as the late 1980s, he also encouraged the application of molecular biology techniques to pediatric respiratory medicine.

The results of his research were published in more than 300 international scientific papers.

On a personal level, much of what we have been able to achieve in our own institutions stems directly from his visionary ideas. We particularly remember his articles describing the pediatric wards of the future: units designed to care for children with acute and chronic respiratory failure, equipped with dedicated respiratory technology, non-invasive monitoring, long-term ventilation facilities, and, above all, highly trained physicians and nurses. Today, these concepts have become reality in Pediatric Intermediate Respiratory Care Units. Likewise, his early vision in sleep medicine ultimately led to the development of specialized services for pediatric sleep disorders and long-term ventilation.

Many of his former trainees have gone on to hold leading academic and clinical positions in Italy and abroad. Regardless of where their careers have taken them – in universities, hospitals, or community practice – they all bear witness to the remarkable medical school that Professor Roberto Ronchetti created.

Yet, beyond all his scientific achievements, the greatest lesson he taught us was a way of thinking. He encouraged us always to ask *why*; never to stop at appearances or accept unquestioningly what everyone else considered established truth; always to look beyond the obvious.

In one of his autobiographical works, published by the Italian Society of Pediatrics, Professor Ronchetti imagined a dialogue with Albert Einstein about life.

It is therefore fitting that we remember our mentor with one of Einstein's most celebrated reflections:

"Everybody knows that something is impossible. Then someone comes along who doesn't know that...and does it."

Thank you, Professor.

All your pupils from Italy and abroad