



OBITUARIES

Giancarlo (Gianni) Berni

Emergency medicine specialist who “taught Italy how to do first aid”

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Giancarlo (Gianni) Berni, who has died just a few months short of his 80th birthday, is credited with bringing emergency and intensive care to the Italian region of Tuscany, where he was born, grew up, and spent his working life.

His methods have since been widely adopted across Italy. As Antonio Panti, president of the Florentine Order of Doctors, observed in a tribute published in *Corriere Fiorentino* after the professor's death, “He taught Italy how to do first aid.”

Before Berni came up with the idea of creating a 24 hour acute care unit that incorporated different strands of specialist internal medicine expertise and diagnostics, “the concept of emergency and critical care didn't really exist in Tuscany,” says Berni's colleague Luigi Tonelli, a retired medical director.

Urgent cases were consigned to the care of doctors without the requisite emergency medicine skills, whose task was to decide which ward the patient would be sent to for investigations and treatment.

In Berni's “hospital within a hospital” model of care, patients were diagnosed and began treatment on the acute care unit, and were then either discharged or sent to an intensive observations area for a maximum of 72 hours before being sent home or admitted.

“This meant that rather than a potentially long hospital stay, more often than not patients were treated promptly and discharged early under family doctor supervision, to continue

the treatment plan set up for them in the hospital,” explains former pupil and retired chief consultant, Alfonso Lagi.

After working as an academic at the University of Florence, Berni decided to pursue a career in hospital medicine, although he continued to teach part time. He described the world opened up to him as a newly qualified doctor as one of “art, wizardry, science, humanity, and dedication.”

Vision for emergency care

Berni first conceived his vision for emergency care while a lead consultant physician at the department of medicine in Santa Maria Hospital in Florence, a post he took up in 1981. He pursued the same strategy when, in 1987, he was appointed director of general medicine at the prestigious Careggi University Hospital, where he worked until he retired in 2006.

Through the Italian Scientific Society of Emergency Physicians, which Berni cofounded and led for many years, his ideas began to spread, prompting the Tuscan health administration to change the regulations for emergency and urgent care provision throughout the region in 2003.

When he retired, the same body put him in charge of the emergency care regional observatory.

Not everyone embraced his way of thinking initially, particularly academics. And as Tonelli pointed out, “He wasn't a politician: he couldn't lie, and he always said what he thought and followed his heart.”

But what he lacked in political wiles, he more than made up for in determination, a sense of justice, and his “tireless” advocacy of patients' needs, said Tonelli, adding that patients often repaid Berni's dedication with bequests of medical equipment.

His ability to elicit the correct diagnosis even in the most baffling of cases—and in the days before imaging techniques were widely available—coupled with his reassuring bedside manner, earned him the widespread admiration and respect of his opponents and the unwavering support and loyalty of other clinicians.

Berni helped set up the school of emergency care medicine and surgery at the university hospital and the dozens of doctors he trained, who are still known as “Berni's Boys,” mostly went on to lead other emergency care departments in Tuscany.

“‘All you need to know is already written in books and scientific journals,’ he used to say,” recalls one Berni Boy, Cesare Francois, now retired. “If you can’t understand what ails your patient and you can’t reach a diagnosis, go back to your books and study some more.”

Berni’s formidable skills helped propel him up the ranks of the Florentine Order of Doctors—he was its deputy—and the regional health administration. He also helped found and run the Federation of Hospital Internist Directors, and was a member of the regional drug commission.

After retiring, Berni was elected to the steering committee of the charitable and philanthropic foundation, Ente Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, before being appointed to its board of directors in 2014.

Perhaps fittingly, Berni died in the emergency department that he had helped create and mould in Careggi University Hospital, after a stroke. Characteristically, he had already made arrangements to donate his organs after his death.

He is survived by his wife, Piera; three children; and five grandchildren.

Biography

Giancarlo (Gianni) Berni, emergency medicine and internal medicine specialist (b 1936; q University of Florence 1961), d 20 June 2016

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