
Renzo Tomatis – The founder of the Monographs Programme, my mentor and role model

I had the pleasure of knowing Lorenzo ("Renzo") Tomatis for more than 30 years. I worked for and with him for over a decade as unit chief for the IARC Monographs programme, the programme Lorenzo was so instrumental in creating, and which has come to be recognized as the monument of primary prevention of cancer. The Monographs program has since won an international reputation for its scientific validity, impartiality, and integrity and for its contribution to preventive measures and public health.

Lorenzo Tomatis and I met first time in summer 1976, when I was a young MD toxicologist interested in occupational cancer prevention working at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health in Helsinki. I had taken the trip to Lyon to meet with Lorenzo, and other staff at IARC, to discuss the evaluation of putative carcinogenic agents. A list of agents increasing cancer risk in humans had been requested by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and in trying to compile such a list, I had become acquainted with the IARC Monographs programme. I was very impressed by the published Monograph volumes, and I wanted to know more about the process and methods of evaluation – that was the reason for my voyage to Lyon.

That first meeting with Lorenzo changed my future. I became an advocate of the Monographs, and soon afterwards I was invited to participate in my first Monographs Working Group-meeting. The experience was overwhelming. I recall that Lorenzo had a simple and direct way of looking at problems that was intuitively appealing and logical. This led to clarity of exposition that made his leadership in the Monographs meeting stimulating and thought provoking. His personality was intellectually shining, thoughtful, and generous, and sometimes, when need be, stubborn. I was sold to the Monographs approach of evaluating the carcinogenic risks to humans.

When Lorenzo had become the Director of the IARC in 1982, he offered me an invitation to come and work with the Monographs programme. I was glad to accept the offer, and originally signed for one year...which was later on prolonged to many more years.

The Monographs programme remained close to Lorenzo's heart, even after he had retired from the Agency. He continued his interest in the Monographs, following closely what happened with the programme. His remarkable writing skills were sharper than ever and his insights for the direction the cancer control effort is taking and the obstacles it is facing unique in their wisdom and foresight.

When I moved to work in Helsinki some five years ago, Lorenzo and I remained in contact, until his death in September 21, 2007. In the last message I received from him, dated August 29, 2007, Lorenzo was bringing up his strong opposition «of dealing with target organs for tumors associated with a given exposure with qualification of degree of evidence»....«I strongly believe it could be misleading and have serious consequences on the protection of public health». This can also be seen as his legacy, with golden words from a man who knew he does not have too much time to live. Lorenzo did not tell us what to do - he only taught all of us what not to do. The rest is now up to us as individuals and as friends and co-workers of Lorenzo. The publication in this volume of his writings related to the early days of the Monographs programme is thus most important for all of us.

Harri Vainio