

Adding Value to Fellowship

Move to the People

Passion and temperament are what Italians do well. Milan-based oral surgeon and key opinion leader, and ICD Fellow and Regent Mauro Labanca is no exception to the rule. In his case, however, these virtues are refined and augmented by a deep love and respect for life and well-being, and a determined dedication to science and sharing his knowledge for the benefit of society, producing a unique Mediterranean blend of perfectionism, people-orientation and practicality. It is empowering qualities as these that have allowed him to implement far-reaching improvements in the already highly successful Italian District – and provide instructive pointers for the College's future readiness.

Mauro Labanca interviewed by Merryn Jongkees

Trained as a doctor and general surgeon, Mauro, like most students, worked hard on low budgets to master the science of medicine and surgery and complete his general training. Needing to supplement his modest income, and putting his manual skills to good use, he started helping out in a friend's private dental practice. He pursued both lines of education for some time, obtaining his medical degree in 1986 from the University of Milan. But feeling irresistibly drawn towards reconstructive surgery and implantology, he decided to pursue dentistry, taking courses in the US and Sweden, and moved from a public hospital setting to private practice.

Privilege to Be Responsible

'I'm very much a man who needs to do his own thing, an independent spirit, so to speak,' Mauro explains. 'The team process is a wonderful thing, deciding how to best treat a patient, and outcomes have been great. But it can be complex also, when you have a strong feeling how to move forward but you are not in charge. It is a privilege to be the one responsible for the chosen solution, and I wanted that, which is why at some point I decided to move to dentistry entirely, and be responsible for the totality of treatment decisions and outcomes. If you make a bad decision, you pay the price; if you make a good one, you get the merit.'

'The decision to switch from general surgery to dentistry was a tortured one. The surgical profession is wonderful and intense – you make life-or-death decisions, you feel horrible when you lose a patient, but you are ecstatic

when you save one. I miss that intensity at times, my involvement is definitely less emotional now than before. But it is a consequence of what I chose, and on balance I'm very happy with it.'

Change = Opportunity

'I certainly don't look back on this course change as a failure of my previous objective, but rather as a wonderful opportunity to use my specific skill set to serve people in a way that makes them and myself happy.' With a smile he continues, 'And even though now my work is less emotionally intense than before, and patients hardly ever risk their lives anymore in my hands, I do have an opportunity now to develop more long-term relationships with my patients, becoming something of a counsellor to them, which I find very enjoyable and fulfilling.'

'Change is actually the essence of life. We see change everywhere, constantly and all around us, and the speed of change is increasing. This can be disconcerting to some, but let's try to welcome change as an opportunity for improvement. Change has brought so much good in this world, in every aspect of life. Change is also happening in the ICD. We need to address it, move forward wisely, and we should certainly not shy away from it.'

'One of my favourite books is "Who Moved My Cheese?"; a practical guide and example of the importance of feeling the need for change and timing it properly. I'm totally prone to changes, trying to apply my past dean's suggestion:



try to be always one step ahead and one step next to all the others!

Small Things Key to Success

In addition to being a successful dental surgeon, Mauro Labanca also has a life as a teacher. 'I'm passionate about sharing my knowledge with others, helping them to be the best they can, allowing my experience to benefit others.' Teaching started early for him, in the first year after his degree as a consultant professor. In teaching his students the importance of relentless concentration and accuracy, he is guided by a very simple philosophy: it is easier to stay out of trouble than to get out of trouble. And the key to staying out of trouble, is to focus on the small things. 'People tend to overlook the small things. But it's there where the mistakes start. So first and foremost I teach my students at the university, just graduated or more aged, how to avoid mistakes. Everyone seems to be more concerned about the difficult and impressive, not considering that this must come from a solid basis and proper knowledge of fundamental rules. But teaching the basics may not give teachers the satisfaction they want, and attendants are not always humble enough to take one step back!'

Mauro now fulfils two academic positions: Consultant Professor of Oral Surgery in the department of Dentistry at Vita e Salute University, San Raffaele Hospital in Milan (where the Dean is Professor Enrico Gherlone); and Professor of Anatomy in the Department of Medicine at the University of Brescia (where the Dean is Professor Rita Rezzani).

Mauro feels strongly about the importance of anatomy: 'You cannot be a good surgeon, either general or dental, if you do not know the anatomy by heart. It's key to being a good dentist and surgeon.' His passion for anatomy has led to various publications and DVDs, as well as to the 'Anatomical Surgery Course with Cadaver Lab', now in its 18th edition and considered one of the best in the world.

Commenting on this great recognition, Mauro explains: 'There is a Latin saying, *mortui vivos docent*, meaning "the dead teach the living". As a surgeon, despite theoretical knowledge, you often learn through your mistakes. That is not the best way to learn. Therefore I teach anatomy-guided surgical procedures on human specimens, pointing out the major anatomical structures and landmarks.'

Holy Ground

Considering such teaching settings a sort of holy ground, Mauro enforces a discipline of utmost respect on his students: 'Before I start the class, I explain what we will be doing. Of course, in learning and practising, students make mistakes, and that is not a problem; but when I detect the slightest lack of respect for the human specimen in any of my students, he or she is immediately removed from the class room. It is a huge generosity when people decide to give their body to science after their death, which enables us to learn from them. That deserves nothing less than total respect.' Mauro's work has instilled in him an almost religious feeling about life and the human body: 'The more you work with it, the more you get a sense of how

- ▶ incredibly perfect the body is, and of the mystery of life, the genius of the inventor of such a great system, however you wish to see it or whatever name you want to give to it. That is why I can get very upset when I see courses done suboptimally, with high commercial and economical interests, sometimes in most unsuitable locations with poor conditions of hygiene, etc. It would seem there are other motivations there than wanting to share with people how to learn anatomy and to work appropriately.'

Other educational and scientific achievements include being the Founder (2011) and President of the Labanca Open Academy, devoted to the improvement of all aspects of dentistry and created as an open network among all participants of his courses; and the Co-Founder (2009) and Vice-President of the Italian Society for the study of Oro-Facial Pain (SISDO).

When asked how he came to be in such a privileged position in many fields, not only limited to dentistry, he answers modestly: 'I have always tried to do things the right way, which enabled me to meet the right people, and earn the respect of the right persons, giving them the assurance that I could be entrusted with this. It was a very fortunate combination of factors that eventually put me on this path.'

Involved in Innovation

Another aspect of his work Mauro thoroughly enjoys is working with excellent materials. 'When you're a psycholo-

gist, all you need is your brain and a chair. As oral surgeons, we also need the very best materials available to do our job. As a key opinion leader to most leading international companies over the last 20 years, it was my privilege to be part of the innovative process that led to the development of superior materials that I can now offer my patients, something I am very proud of. This effort involved much travel around the world, attending conferences, giving lectures, sharing ideas, and working with people from diverse cultures. It gave me great pleasure and fulfilment, and has led to the development of innovative materials that are now used in many parts of the world to benefit our patients. Additionally, I develop very good relationships with companies, a helpful support to some of my cultural activities, ICD included!'

Commenting on his collaborations, Mauro points out: 'Sharing is actually one of my favourite words. I love to share. To me, it means to give what I can and to receive what I can, listening and looking to people, trying to grasp what they are trying to express.' Then reflecting a theme that is common among many ICD Fellows, he goes on: 'Another favourite word is "privileged". I feel tremendously privileged with what life has given me. I can feel disappointed when some people argue or complain, as if they forget how privileged we are with the life we have. And because of my privileges, I have a desire to give something back and to live in a thankful attitude.'



Into ICD

So how did he become involved in the ICD? 'Well, about ten years ago, the Section President was Dr Giorgio Blasi, a wonderful man, and Corrado Paganelli became the Italian Regent. He had always been a very good friend of mine, and when he had accepted the position he came to me and said, "I will take on this role, but you must be my vice-Regent. I didn't know much about the ICD at the time, but seeing it was Corrado who asked, I of course said yes. I soon realised that here again was a great opportunity and privilege, allowing me to meet people like Walter van Driel, Dov Sydney, Phillip Dowell and many others of course, who I'm pleased to say have become very good friends of mine.'

'I will admit I was flattered to be asked. Recognition from such high-level people means you must be doing something right. It's a wonderful thing to be part of such a worldwide group of people, and it gave me an even greater sense of wanting to be responsible for my actions. It has made me more proud to be a dentist, and it motivated me to spread the objectives of the College all over the world, letting others know what ICD is about, and that it's a good thing to be a part of and help move forward.'

Successful District – Respectful and Personal

The Italian District of ICD Europe is arguably a very successful district in the Section in terms of membership and financial stability. How does he explain its success? 'I must say that the previous Italian Regent, Corrado Paganelli, is a wonderfully diplomatic person (I think he could have had a great career in diplomacy or politics!). I'm not. I'm a typical surgeon. Everything must be "cut and dried", so to speak, and that is how I do things. So when I accepted the Regency, I explained to the Board I had to do things my way, meaning very disciplined structures for membership, finances, attendance, etc., and being tough at times. One of the first things I did was to remove people who were obviously not interested in Fellowship. They never attended, didn't even pay their dues. I explained to them: "Look, this is an honorary organisation, you should feel privileged to be a member, and serve and respect the College. That respect starts with paying your dues. If you don't, it obviously doesn't mean anything to you and you have no business here. I don't mind how important you are, what your name is, if you are not active, I cannot keep you on the list of Fellows." So, our membership quickly dropped from 70 to 40... Obviously this is not a politically correct thing, but it was my way. Many of my colleagues pay a fortune on golf clubs and things like that, and they accept their rules. It's not mandatory to be a member. But if you want to be part of the College, you have to accept College rules.'

Adding Value to Fellowship

'My goal is to have personal contact with all my Fellows. I'm a people person. I find that personal, one-on-one contact is a key to the atmosphere and connectivity in the District. We started organising District meetings in a new way, with a scientific session, gala dinner, music – it was my way of giving something back to them. Also, Italian companies

were able to make exclusive offers and discounts available for our Fellows, which helped to make ICD membership attractive to them. So it became a two-way thing: you are happy to give something to ICD, and it's nice to get something in return. I tried to combine as many elements as possible to add value to the ICD membership for our Fellows, and create a win-win situation.'

Recruitment Strategy – a More Practical Mix

'ICD is great at suggesting humanitarian strategies. That is wonderful and something to cherish and preserve. However, sometimes we must move forward and add some practicality also. Humanitarian work is excellent for all, particularly perhaps for older Fellows who are approaching the end of their careers. But we also need new forces, younger people, with a shorter CV or less impressive background. Perhaps we shouldn't expect younger dentists to be attracted by the humanitarian aspect or prestige only. Perhaps we need to offer them something more practical, more short-term opportunities, like conference attendance, or journal subscriptions. Lower level, more immediate benefits.'

And then Mauro reveals another side to his character – that of the business man. 'For instance, take our project Tailor-Made for ICD. My lovely fiancée Mercedes had introduced me to several people from the fashion world, including a tailor who created special designs for Dolce & Gabbana. I contacted him, and he made ICD Italy a unique offer: call a designated telephone number, and a tailor comes to your house or office; takes your measure for a suit; comes back for a second fit; and after the third fit you have a beautiful custom-made outfit at a very reasonable price. It really makes you feel like a VIP. Additionally, I use the project to generate some extra income for the ICD that can be used on humanitarian or other initiatives. Being a member of the Non Dues Revenue Task Force and Ambassador for the Global vision found in the ICD, I feel driven to do my best for a proper fundraising for my College! Again, a win-win situation.'

Vision for the Future

'I think it is now time we take the ICD out of the golden cage. We may have been too content with ourselves and the way we did things and the places we met. I would hope that ICD can move from the more elite position to a more human-oriented approach. We can't stay where we are, we need to move to the people. On the one hand we work hard to include people from, say, Eastern Europe, but on the other we also want to stay exclusive – the 5-star hotels, lovely, but very expensive. Let's make it more accessible to other people and not think that the College will benefit only from older and richer people. The less rich colleagues from less affluent countries can give us huge support: smart people and brilliant ideas come from everywhere and do not depend on economical status! Let's welcome these people, and be open to the new generations and the new reality.' ■