Necrologia

Giovanni di Guglielmo †
(1886-1961)

«L’apport personnel de l’auteur est souvent présenté avec tant de modestie, qu’il faut connaître ses publications antérieures pour lui rendre toute justice!» These words by Paul Chevallier sum up the essential personality of Giovanni Di Guglielmo whose death on February 19, 1961 at the age of 75, left a void in the field of Haematology and among his fellow men. All who knew Giovanni Di Guglielmo will remember him with the deepest affection and esteem. This great man had dedicated over half a century to haematology, in which he was absorbed up to the day of his death. At this time he was intent upon the foundation and organization of the Haematologic Institute in Rome, which it is hoped to open shortly. At the same time, he was working on his “scientific testament” as he himself liked to call it, his book on “Erythraemic and Erythroleukaemic Conditions”.

Giovanni Di Guglielmo was born in 1886, in San Paulo, Brazil, the eldest child of a family of six born to emigrants from the village of Andretta in Italy’s Campania region. At six years of age he was sent to Italy for his education, and completed his years of study by obtaining his medical degree at the Naples University in 1911. There he met Adolfo Ferrata, whose pupil he became, thereby taking the first steps towards his distinguished career.

1915 proved an important year in Di Guglielmo’s personal life, for it was then that he met and married Rosa Farani, who was to be the faithful companion of his lifetime and devoted mother of his four children, Renato, Sergio, Lucio and Adriana. Renato was born in 1916 and in September of the same year Giovanni Di Guglielmo was called to the front as field Medical Officer. Although at the front line, Di Guglielmo continued to speculate on haematology, and in 1917 he published in No. 17 of “Folia Medica” his paper “A case of erythro-leukaemia. Megacaryocytes in the blood stream and their platelet-forming function”. In this work he assumed the existence of a complete series of what is now known as myeloproliferative diseases, affecting all three cellular systems of bone marrow, erythro-leuko-megakaryocytic systems, with all their possible morbid associations. In the following years Di Guglielmo himself described the morbid conditions, whose existence he had previously assumed. The discovery of acute erythaemia occurred in 1923; in 1941 came the first description of chronic erythaemia and in 1956 Di Guglielmo himself showed cases of acute erythromega-karyocyttaemia and acute erythro-leuko-megakaryocyttaemia. These observations closed the cycle of the various forms of myeloproliferating conditions, a cycle opened in 1917 when the existence of chronic erythro-leuko-megakaryocyttaemia was demonstrated. Di Guglielmo added: “Fate has willed that this cycle be completed by that same person who happened to open it exactly 40 years ago.”

May I also mention a histological bone marrow formation observed by Di Guglielmo in 1941, called by him the reticulo-erythroblastic island, as it consists of a reticular cell surrounded by a crown of erythroblasts. Di Guglielmo realized that this formation is not a casual one, but a functional anatomic unit, which serves to establish a link between the reticular cell and the erythroblasts. Seventeen years later, Bessis ascertained the function of this link by means of
electron microscopy – namely, that it “feed” ferritin molecules from reticular cells to erythroblasts.

National and international honours have been plentifully bestowed upon Giovanni Di Guglielmo, notably, the naming of Erythraemia as Di Guglielmo’s disease or syndrome after the suggestion of Ferdinando Micheli and William Dameshek. In spite of this, Di Guglielmo retained the extreme modesty, which was natural to his personality. The major testimony to his greatness remains the body of his own work, and the example of his own life. Both the brilliance of his mind, and the warmth of his personality, stand to guide and inspire those who knew him as a friend, or remember him as a teacher, and indeed such following investigators as may be even now on the threshold of haematologic research. G. Astaldi, Tortona