

24 January 2023

A Tribute to Ralph L. Sacco

In Memoriam: Ralph L. Sacco, by Peter Kelly, ESO President

Our esteemed friend and colleague, Ralph Sacco, died peacefully on January 17th in New York in the company of his family. He will be greatly missed. Ralph was Olemberg Family Chair in Neurological Disorders and Professor of Neurology at Leonard M Miller School of Medicine at the University of Miami.

Ralph grew up in New Jersey in a busy Italian-American family, and was the first of his family to go to medical school. After completion of his undergraduate degree at Cornell University, he did his medical degree at Boston University, where he first discovered his lasting passion for stroke prevention, working under the mentorship of Philip Wolf on the Framingham Study. By the time he was an intern, he had published his first two lead-author papers on stroke risk, an early marker of his star qualities. He completed his training with a Neurology residency in Columbia University Medical Centre in New York, followed by a Masters in Epidemiology, before joining the faculty at Columbia.

From the beginning, Ralph championed the importance of stroke, with particular focus on prevention in minority and under-served communities, who had been often overlooked in earlier studies. At Columbia, he established the Power to End Stroke initiative with the American Heart Association, focussing on stroke prevention in African-American communities, and the multi-ethnic Northern Manhattan Study (NOMAS). Through his work on NOMAS and related studies, he produced an important body of clinical science clarifying the role of modifiable risk factors for stroke across ethnic groups in the USA, which has informed subsequent policy and prevention initiatives. In 2007, Ralph was appointed Chair of Neurology at the University of Miami. He continued his research in Florida, leading the foundation of initiatives such as the Florida Stroke Registry, Florida-Puerto Rico Collaboration to Reduce Stroke Disparities, and the Family Study of Stroke Risk and Carotid Atherosclerosis. He was also instrumental in driving translational research via his leadership of the University of Miami Clinical and Translational Science Institute.

Ralph joined the American Heart Association as a medical student in the 1980s. He remained a lifelong committed volunteer in the AHA, chairing the Stroke Advisory Committee from 2005-2008, and was elected President in 2010, the first neurologist to hold this position. Typically, in his inauguration speech, he emphasised his goals to increase the focus on stroke and cardiovascular prevention in minority American communities. In 2017 he was elected President of the American Academy of Neurology, the first time that a neurologist had led both AAN and AHA, and served on the World Stroke Organisation Board of Directors. In 2020, he was appointed Editor-in-Chief of the AHA journal Stroke.

A regular visitor to ESOC and Europe, Ralph had many friends and scientific collaborators in ESO, with whom he was always excellent company, often accompanied by good food and wine. He was highly supportive of younger colleagues, which I experienced personally at our first meeting at ISC in the late 1990s. He will be remembered as an outstanding Clinician-Scientist, a role model, a

leader, and a friend to many in the field of Stroke Medicine.

Ní bheidh a leithéid ann arís (We will not see his like again soon).

A Personal Tribute by Charlotte Cordonnier

I only met Ralph recently and wish I had got a longer time in his team. However, it is as if – like many neurologists worldwide – I had always known him. As a resident, I had read his numerous papers. I was impressed. I once saw him but did not dare to say hello. It was one of my first ISC attendance. I had the “European” jetlag and ended up at the gym at 5.30am. But guess who was also at the gym? Prof. Sacco who obviously was not suffering from any jetlag and seemed like he did that every single day. Then I thought that to become a key opinion leader you had to go to the gym every day at 5.30 am.

From far away, I appreciated that – as a stroke specialist – he was very much involved in both the Neurology and Cardiovascular arenas. He seemed to be in the right political place to represent the diversity of neurology (being the president of the AAN as a stroke specialist) but also of cardiovascular specialty (being the president of the AHA as a neurologist). In December 2019, I received an email from Ralph asking if I’d like to join his editorial team for the Stroke Journal. Of course, I was extremely interested (and flattered). Unfortunately, I was under chemo for an acute leukemia and was unsure about what would come next. I was open about my situation and Ralph was amazing. He said that as long as I felt that I could do the job, he was happy to have me on board. At a time when I felt vulnerable, Ralph gave me a hand. This is not so common in our competitive academic world. For the past 2 years, we had fun during our monthly web meetings. He showed great leadership with an amazing ability to listen and take everybody on board. He paid special attention to improving diversity among the board, but also among authors and themes that the journal would cover. My experience with Ralph is probably a drop in the ocean for those who have known him for a long time, but as a European neurologist who started her residency in 2000, Prof Ralph Sacco has been part of my professional – and for the last 2 years – personal journey. Thanks for the ride!

A Personal Memoir of Ralph Sacco by Bo Norrving:

Dear Colleagues, and friends,

Ralph Sacco died from glioblastoma on January 17th, 2023. For the global stroke and neurology research and advocacy network this came as a shock, and it is still difficult to grasp that one of our long-standing and most highly esteemed colleagues is no longer with us.

My pathways with Ralph started to cross in the 1990s, when we meet at the European and US stroke conferences sharing similar research areas. Ralph had started to work on Framingham-data, and soon started the Northern Manhattan Study (NOMASS), an ambitious project that very early after its start began to present and publish important findings. Very early on, he started to use the meme that “stroke is predictable and preventable”. NOMASS pioneered the study on racial-ethnic

disparities and socioeconomic factors in stroke epidemiology, which had wide-ranging implications domestically and abroad. With time, NOMASS included more and more items and indicators, and it was unique in the delineation of risk factors, atherosclerosis, and comorbidities. From his clinical roots, Ralph was a master in grasping and communicating difficult global public health concepts, with a deep understanding of the essentials.

10-15 years later our pathways crossed in our engagement in the stroke advocacy field, for me in the World Stroke Organization and the European Stroke Organisation, for Ralph in the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association. Ralph became the first stroke-person to be President of the AHA, during my term as President of the WSO. The collaboration between the WSO and the AHA/ASA continued to grow during this period, in our joint work on recognizing the burden of stroke and need to bring stroke out of the shadow of heart disease. We were both present at the historical UN meeting on NCDs in 2011 as well as at several later UN meetings. Ralph's skills to frame messages encouraging politicians and communities to connect and engage with issues around health bloomed at these events.

Ralph was also a bridge builder between the stroke/cardiovascular fields and neurology, and he played key roles in improving quality improvements and education in both fields from his leadership positions.

I and many, many others will miss Ralph profoundly. In his many activities, Ralph was incredibly influential and successful, with his searing intelligence, his wisdom, and his strategic skills - but all this was embodied in his warm, generous, and prestige-free personality that will continue to serve as a role model and inspiration for all of us.



UN NCD meeting 2014, Ralph Sacco and Bo Norrving



2018 ISC in LA, Lou Caplan, Bruce Campbell, Heini Mattle, Geoffrey Donnan, Ralph Sacco and Steve David. Bo Norrving is behind the lens. On the way to the Stroke editorial board meeting.