

# The challenge of cardiovascular research in the province

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While I was active as a senior fellow at the University Hospital in Zurich I struggled as most Ticinesi do, between the desire to pursue my academic career and the “Stalldrang” to return to the provinces. At this time I was fortunate enough, after spending two sabbaticals at Stanford and John Hopkins; to set up, together with Professor Marko Turina, the first cardiac Transplant programme in the country thanks to a grant from the University of Zurich. During this marvellous period in Zurich one of my best childhood friends, doctor Luca Leonardi, an ETH mathematician, who eventually also became an MD and who wished to become a cardiologist, came and worked with me at the USZ. We wondered at that time whether we should sometime move together back to Ticino. Luca unfortunately died as an expedition doctor in the Himalaya mountains while he was working in Zurich. I took the decision to go back to southern Switzerland, and applied for a position as chief of internal medicine in Bellinzona, a small little town where Luca and I came from. One of my first thoughts after having spent more than 20 years at the

university hospitals of Basel, Bern, Zurich and London was that, in spite of the exciting new clinical tasks, I would never survive in the rural areas without a clinical research activity. So we set up a small clinical cardiovascular research unit. In fact, it was the right intuitive thought since from the beginning it was really amazing how many young doctors in this regional hospital applied enthusiastically for the research fellow positions where they could elaborate and realise, with steady support from a senior mentor, on-site clinical projects.

We focused our research activities mostly on vascular research, i.e., extra-coronary atherosclerosis, endovascular therapy of the lower limb arteries and aorta, and in imaging atherosclerosis. One of the keys of success to win the challenge was to exploit all the local forces from the local hospital and from our common public health system (EOC) establishing first-line contacts with the divisions of radiology, vascular surgery and nuclear medicine. The fortunate presence of the nearby Institute of Immunology in Bellinzona, where we were involved in its infancy in the late 90's, and of

**Table 1**

Output Cardiovascular Research Unit, Ospedale San Giovanni Bellinzona.

Selected Publications (on site initiated studies)	Grants	Oral presentations / Posters
Circulation	5 SNF	2 ESC
JACC	2 SHF	5 ACC
EJH	3 ABREOC	3 AHA
Radiology	2	
J EVT	4	
Atherosclerosis	1	

JACC = Journal of the American College of Cardiology; EJH = European Heart Journal; J EVT = Journal of Endovascular Therapy; SNF = Swiss National Science Foundation; SHF = Swiss Heart Foundation; ABREOC = Advisory Board EOC; ESC = European Society of Cardiology; ACC = American College of Cardiology; AHA = American Heart Association

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the new University of Southern Switzerland chaired by his first president – Professor Marco Baggiolini – an international regarded and awarded scientist also native to Bellinzona, were all favourable factors for a good start. Very important was the continuous trust by our external collaborators opinion leaders, and experts who supported our clinical and research activities among them Professor L. von Segesser, Professor Felix Mahler and Professor Luigi Inglese, and obviously the nearby rapidly developing Cardiocentro.

Slowly but surely the first MD theses were accepted, the first series of abstracts came through, and distinct clinical research and in situ elaborated projects could be realised, submitted, and accepted as original articles in high-ranked journals with respectable impact factor. We were also successful in fundraising receiving financial support through two Swiss national research grants and from other institutions among them the Swiss Heart Foundation as well as from industry. We had the opportunity to lead as PI initiator and institution several national multicentre studies.

The strong cooperation with the emerging Cardiocentro Ticino led by our friend Professor Tiziano Moccetti, the sharing of clinical and research fellows, the conductance of joint projects with the University of Zurich and Lausanne, and the collaboration with ETH (i.e., in the domain of MRI) as well as with several university centres in Italy and abroad, were also formidable incentives to improve our position.

During the last five years it has been a pleasure for me to see how a second local generation of clinical researchers are launching new projects in other domains such as sport cardiology, cardiac rehabilitation or other orphan diseases, e.g., cardiac syndrome X, and introducing new clinical experimental technologies for measuring endothelial function and exploring the autonomic nervous system. It is very rewarding to see how, within the past 20 years, a culture for cardiovascular research has grown into adulthood in Ticino in accordance to what has happened in other medical fields, such as oncology.