

## In memoriam of Professor Emilia Martignoni (1951-2011)

### Always thinking of her

Now, almost two years since her death, Emilia Martignoni is still greatly missed by everyone who was privileged to know her and to have her as a friend. Emi was a transparent and straightforward person, but at the same time multifaceted. She was a rigorous scientist, a big-hearted and approachable physician, and, quite simply, a special and lovely person.

She came to Pavia, from Varese, in the early 1970s to train as a doctor in one of the world's oldest and most prestigious faculties of medicine. Here she met Professor Giuseppe Nappi and, together with a "handful" of brilliant and determined young people, formed a highly active research group at the Casimiro Mondino Institute of Neurology. The first tangible fruits of this collaboration appeared in 1979 in the form of scientific papers published in prestigious international journals. These were to prove just the first of a host of publications on a wide range of topics, including neuroendocrinology, headache, the autonomic nervous system, Parkinson's disease, dementia, brain aging, and the effects of high altitude on the nervous system.

But as well as being a great scientist, Emi was also an exceptional physician. Remembering her at work in the department (the legendary Division C of the Mondino Institute in via Palestro, in the heart of the old part of Pavia), in outpatient clinics, or talking at length on the telephone with her patients, many virtues spring to mind: dedication, passion, willingness, decisiveness, curiosity, competence. Never prepared to let her patients' disease win, she was always ready to try a possible new solution, to give hope to those who had reached the end of their journey.

People who, like Emi, devote themselves so intensely to their work often end up neglecting other important aspects of life, or their relations with people from outside their professional sphere. But not "our Emi". Emi the person was even better than Emi the scientist/physician. That seems impossible, but it is true. Emi loved, and helped others to love, beautiful things, like classical music, which she listened to whenever she could, and books, which she devoured at an incredible rate. Emi was good at listening to the problems of others, and indeed actively wanted to do so.

And she gave wise advice, always. Emi would shoulder the burden of other people's troubles and, in so doing, seemed to work magic, as problems somehow became lighter and easier to bear once she had taken them on, for her too, even though they were not of course. And whenever she was the one with problems, she preferred to keep quiet, primarily in order to avoid having to criticize others. Criticizing, indeed, was something she never did, at most giving just a shrug of her shoulders.

Restlessly curious, heeding the inner flame that impelled her to do things and go places, Emi traveled the world, encountering and appreciating a range of different people and cultures. In the course of her travels, she found, in Ladakh in the Himalayas (the top of the world where the earth meets the sky), a place where her thirst for answers to life's great questions was, to an extent, sated.

I remember one particular photograph in which Emi sits amongst the rocks next to one of her greatest friends, chatting animatedly about something. Fluttering around her are *lung-ta*, little prayer flags made from colored fabric that the people of the Himalayas still use to invoke wisdom, harmony, compassion and strength. *Lung-ta* – the term means "wind horses" – are hung in places exposed to the wind. In this way, the weather wears the fabric and allows the invocations to be scattered in the air and so heard.

I like to remember that photograph of Emi sitting there happily and to think of the *lung-ta* surrounding her, imagining them to represent the emotions and the lessons she gave us, the lovely things she said to us and all the good she did us. I would love to think that everyone who knew her and learned something from her remembers her every time they see a piece of colored ribbon fluttering.

The days following her death were filled with words of sorrow and condolence and emotional recollections. Among the many, one phrase in particular summed up perfectly all that Professor Emilia Martignoni, with all her human and professional qualities, had been: "In life you can choose to be as light as a violin, yet still leave an indelible mark on those around you." I don't remember who said it, but it was undoubtedly someone who had understood Emi in her true and purest essence.

All this is what Emi was, a light yet at the same time deep soul who, without ever disturbing or asking for anything in return, accompanied, guided and loved us. And who quietly left us, before her time.



Emilia Martignoni with the Mondino Institute of Neurology research group in the '70s



Himalayan prayer flags called *lung-ta*

Cristina Tassorelli MD, PhD  
IRCCS C. Mondino Foundation  
and University of Pavia

