

OBITUARY

Gino Strada, a man I was lucky to meet

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I met Gino Strada in 2004 at his office in Milan, after my first mission with Emergency in Sierra Leone, and few weeks later, during a very successful and fascinating conference in

Piacenza. I was proud to be there. Gino knew how to speak to the people and how to rise emotions, enthusiasms and sense of humanity, telling the war tragedies encountered during his life dedicated to the victims of war and violence.

He loved Afghanistan and its people, and was a good friend of Massud, the Afghanistan leader from the Panjshir valley, killed by Al Qaeda two days before the Twin Tower tragedy. Even in these moments of tragedy for Afghanistan, Emergency is still running three hospitals in the country, at the top level for war and violence trauma care since more than 15 years. A small apartment was always ready for Gino in Kabul, Lashkar-gah or Panjshir Valley. Coming to the hospitals to monitor, support and stimulate, he appeared so relaxed and pleased in the wards.

I had the opportunity to work in Panjshir and Lashkar-gah and still remember the sense of humanity and the professionalism transmitted by the local staff and my other expatriate colleagues. After the kidnapping of the Italian journalist Mastrogiacomio, the situation became dangerous, the hospitals were suddenly closed and the whole expatriate staff sent

to Dubai for few days. I cannot forget the discussions between us and Gino about the future of the Afghanistan hospitals. We felt a genuine affection for the people. The commitment to that unlucky country was noteworthy.

Not only Afghanistan. Emergency gave an other privilege to me: Sierra Leone. Our hospital was the only really functioning in the country after the civil war. In this totally different setting from Afghanistan, the high number of children admitted to the hospital for the accidental ingestion of caustic soda, used to make soap at home, was almost epidemic. This issue pushed me to the attempt to treat endoscopically these unlucky children with a deeply damaged esophagus. Gino agreed to this proposal and the venture is still going on after 15 years. I was in Sierra for the last time in 2010 and I remember with great regret patients and local staff.

Before founding Emergency, Gino worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Speaking with my colleagues when I was in ICRC, I understood how he was appreciated. However, often he was defined “not an easy man”. Indeed, he was exuberant, often impetuous, but definitely sincere and, at the end, a generous and talented man (and surgeon) aiming to the essential of a human ethic relationships.

After so many projects for treating war victims, Gino launched the ambitious project to build in Kartoum (Sudan) a referral hospital for African patients (children and adult) coming from the surrounding countries with congenital or acquired cardiac diseases. There were several criticisms, even from humanitarian NGOs, but the challenge to give to African patients the same level of care of western countries became a

reality and the beautiful, technological cardiac hospital is still working there, taking care of patients coming from the sub-saharian Africa. Recently, a referral Emergency pediatric hospital began its activity in Entebbe (Uganda), since the spring of 2021. Ambitious and certainly expensive projects, which however demonstrate how proper and effective care, even technologically advanced, may not be only a dream in Africa.

Gino left us a heredity: to fight against the prejudices, the violence, the war, any duplicity and falseness. He taught us, physicians and surgeons, to take care of our patients with the sense of humanity which any human being, and especially doctors, should have toward their own kind.