

OBITUARY: OTTAVIO POMPEIANO (1927-2008)



The 1st of June 2008, Professor Ottavio Pompeiano died in Pisa at the age of 81. He was Professor Emeritus of Physiology at the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Pisa and the Chief Editor of *Archives Italiennes de Biologie* for over a quarter of a century.

With him disappears one of the last and most brilliant members of the “*Via San Zeno School of Physiology*”, as was called the extraordinary concentration of researchers from all over the world that worked in Pisa throughout the period between the early 1950 and 1970, inspired and guided by Giuseppe Moruzzi in the Physiology Institute in Via San Zeno in Pisa.

Ottavio Pompeiano graduated in Medicine and Surgery at the University of Bologna in 1950 and in 1953 he came to Pisa to work in the Institute directed by Prof. Moruzzi. In 1956 he moved to Scandinavia to acquire further experience in neuroanatomy and physiology in the laboratory of Alf Brodal in Oslo where he studied the neuroanatomical organization of the vestibular system. The results represented the early frame of the famous monograph on “*The Vestibular Nuclei and their Connections*”, published some years later together with Brodal and Walberg. In the same period, he also worked in Stockholm at the Karolinska Institute, in the laboratory of the Nobel laureate Ragnar Granit, with whom he published the “*Reflex control of Posture and Movement*”.

Returned to the University of Pisa, where in 1967 he was appointed as Full Professor of Physiology at Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, he devoted himself to research and teaching for over 34 years. The team lead by Prof. Pompeiano produced important and internationally recognized research contributions in many fields of neurosciences. His studies extended from the field of motor control, particularly of vestibular and cerebellar control of posture, to that of the neurophysiologic mechanisms of sleep, where he described for the first time the sleep atonia occurring during paradoxical sleep.

In the last part of his career, within the space mission *Neurolab*, supported by N.A.S.A., Prof. Pompeiano focused his efforts on the study of the plastic modifications induced by microgravity in the nervous system. His research program shed new light on the role of the noradrenergic system in the adaptation processes that take place during the permanence in space as well as in the readaptation to the terrestrial environment after landing and provided a novel perspective for investigating brain plasticity.

For his scientific contributions, Prof. Pompeiano received many important international awards. Among them, the prestigious Båràny Gold Medal from the University of Uppsala in 1983 for “*the most valuable work on the vestibular system made in the last five years*”; and the Distinguished Scientist Award from the American Sleep Research Society in 1999.

When, in 1981 Pompeiano succeeded to Giuseppe Moruzzi as Chief Editor of “*Archives Italiennes de Biologie*”, he undertook this job with the same genuine enthusiasm, devotion and competence that had characterized his whole life as a researcher and as a University professor. He designed Special Issues that have become classic collections, like the one in honour of Rita Levi-Montalcini in 1983, or the one for Michel Jouvét in 2004, and made *Archives* more and more known among the international scientific community. It would be almost no exaggeration to say that for Professor Pompeiano *Archives* were the first thought in the morning when he woke up and the last one at night before he fell asleep. And this remained true until the very last days of his life.

Ottavio Pompeiano leaves a tremendous legacy to the scientific community, as a researcher, as a teacher and as an Editor. He has formed many generations of students, including many who are now leading scientists at prestigious institutions in Italy or abroad. To all of us who have had the privilege to work with him, Professor Pompeiano has taught that there is no other way to do things than doing them in the RIGHT way. This is what we promise *Archives Italiennes de Biologie* will keep doing to honour his memory.

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