

For the sake of children

by **Marika Azzopardi**

Most people have heard of 'Puttinu'. The Puttinu Cares Support Group was set up with the establishment of the Wonderland paediatric oncology ward at St Luke's Hospital. This coincided with the appointment of Dr Victor Calvagna as paediatric oncology consultant in September 2000. The Synapse gets up close to this paediatric oncologist whose work brings him exclusively in contact with children and teenagers afflicted by cancer.

"It was the nurses working on the ward who came up with the idea of setting up this foundation. At the time, we were joined by a number of volunteers like Claudia Taylor East and Toots Birch and through the latter two contacts, we obtained a sponsorship from HSBC and the right to use 'Puttinu' as part of our logo. The main aim of the group was to improve the quality of life of children with cancer by supporting them and their families socially, financially and emotionally, as well as making sure that they receive the best evidence-based treatment which was available to all children in the developed countries."

The support group keeps Dr Calvagna particularly busy with tasks such as chairing the monthly committee meeting, as well as representing the group at most of the fund-raising activities. "Nowadays, these activities take place on a regular basis. I attend most of the interviews, being regularly invited to make appearances and interventions on TV and radio programmes. I liaise with the committee officials to make sure that the strategies decided by the committee are on the right track. Most of the trouble shooting is also done by myself. I also represent the group in any discussions with health officials or other important functionaries. Initially these activities were not very time-consuming but as the popularity of the support group increased, these activities have become part of my weekly schedule!"

'Puttinu Cares' raises funds through varied methods. Monies come in the form of donations received from private individuals or organizations who take up calls for support and offer financial assistance. Next in line come the fund-raising activities which are organized on the own initiatives of some organizations who pass on their proceeds to the support group.



Incidentally, the 'Puttinu Cares' support group recently made the headlines through a very well-attended fund-raising activity. This was a football marathon that raised almost Lm 50,000, an event which called for massive organization.

"The marathon was held on the 20, 21, and 22 April of this year and involved 60 hours' worth of football-playing which saw the participation of some 400 football teams at the Marsa grounds. The event involved collaboration with the Kunsill Malti għall-Isports and TV coverage by Channel 22. The Maltese people were encouraged to send their financial support through mobile phone text messages, or by depositing money directly into our account. Some TV programmes like Tista Tkun Int and Replay were of great help, as was the visit by the Italian goalkeeper Gianluca Buffon who took part in a charity football match on our behalf."

On the flip side of the fund-raising coin, Dr Calvagna has also very recently been fundamental in work linked to another just cause – the Jose Carreras Leukaemia Foundation

which was in the limelight following Mr Carreras' memorable concert held in June. Thanks to the hard work shouldered by all those involved, a cheque of Lm 2,200 was presented to Jose Carreras himself on June 9, during a friendly football match. This was held between an Austrian team led by former Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schussel and a Maltese contingent of parliamentarians and other personalities. Although the Maltese team was beaten 3-2 by a visibly older team of Austrians, the Maltese were winners through and through. Dr Calvagna explains what eventually happened ...

"The Carrera event was organized through the initiative of Bawag Malta Bank and various other local and foreign commercial institutions. They planned the fund-raising football match between Maltese MPs and a selection of Austrian Parliamentarians. I participated in the game and played for the Malta side. The proceeds of this match were passed to Mr Carrera's Leukaemia Foundation and the latter very generously passed on these funds to our support group."

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It is thought-provoking how things and coincidental events may bring surprises. The initial contact between Bawag Malta Bank and the Maltese support group came through a friend of one of the Wonderland patients. Mr Jose Carreras himself had developed leukaemia during the eighties and survived following treatment and a successful bone marrow transplant and as Mr Calvagna rightly points out, "...is still with us performing with his exquisite baritone voice."

Meanwhile, 'Puttinu Cares' has other plans for the future. "Presently our main aim is to buy property close to the Royal Marsden Hospital in Sutton, London. This will ensure that when our patients go to the Royal Marsden Hospital for treatment that can't be carried out in Malta, as in the case of a stem cell transplant, they will have all the accommodation that they require without any hassle. This venture will cost around 200 to 300 thousand Maltese Liri and we are still a long way away from that target. However through the generosity of the Maltese and that of others we will eventually get there."

Dealing with very sick children is what Dr Calvagna's work is all about. He describes life in the Wonderland ward. "On average, we see one new case a month. However during 2006 we saw an average of two cases per month. There is no one age when children are more prone to being admitted to this ward. It depends on the type of tumour, as for example, acute leukaemia is more common in children aged two to four."



Quizzed on the emotional difficulty of working on a daily basis with very sick children, Dr Calvagna remarks, "It is hard to work with sick children. However I believe that working with chronically sick patients of any age is difficult for every person involved. In the case of children's cancer it is even more difficult because we have to deal with the emotional, psychological and sometimes social problems of the family as well. On the positive side, I can confirm that we still manage to cure about 70% of cases and this gives us enough courage to be optimistic. There come times when the ward is full of very sick children who are going through hard times. However, it is not always like that and as these patients' conditions improve, their smile will return, as will their quality of life, their growth and development. In most cases once children manage to beat their cancer they grow into normal healthy adults." □

A V I A N I N F L U E N Z A

Update on Avian Influenza

by **Tanya Melillo Fenech MD MSc(HSM) Dip(HSM)**
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Avian Flu virus change lowers vaccine effectiveness

A change in the avian flu virus strain H5N1 has diminished the effectiveness of the vaccine against the disease. Avian flu vaccines are produced according to the gene type Z found in the avian flu virus strain H5N1 in 2003 but another gene type G was detected in 2005 and these two genes are not similar. So vaccines are more effective against type Z and less effective against type G.

New antiviral drug – Peramivir

A new antiviral drug to treat both avian and human flu, developed by United States-based BioCryst Pharmaceuticals, will be tested across Asia this summer.

In animal trials, the drug boosted the survival rates of mice and ferrets infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus.

The development of peramivir may be an answer to experts who want to have several antivirals to choose from when fighting the different types of flu, especially since the viruses mutate quickly.

Mild avian flu in Britain this May has pandemic potential

Four human cases tested positive for H7N2, a mild strain of avian flu, in Wales this May from a small farm which reported the death of several chickens. This is a reminder that the next flu pandemic can be sparked by a virus other than the feared H5N1 strain.

Health officials are currently investigating 142 people who

may also be infected, of whom 12 have symptoms of flu or conjunctivitis. Health officials are treating hospital staff and patients after a health care worker caught the virus and also a primary school where one of the pupils developed symptoms.

Low pathogenic viruses can quickly morph into highly pathogenic ones, sometimes within weeks. Too little is known about flu viruses to predict with any certainty which ones are most lethal for humans.

Unlike many other avian flu subtypes, which disappear off the radar after a short period, H5N1 has remained entrenched in the environment, and continues to spread to new areas.

Still, while no avian flu virus can be ruled out when it comes to igniting the next pandemic, some clues may exist. Though H5N1 has several worrying characteristics, other flu subtypes are also in the running for the pandemic title. The last two flu pandemics were the result of a human flu virus recombining with low pathogenic avian viruses.

Antibodies from survivors may hold clue to bird flu remedy

An article published in May in The Public Library of Science Journal PLoS Medicine describes how antibodies from survivors of the Vietnamese H5N1 strain were used to prevent mice from developing the infection by neutralizing the virus. Human monoclonal antibodies were created and trained to recognize the H5N1 virus. The role of antibodies in the body is to recognize and initiate an attack against the offending antigen – in this case the avian virus – and destroy it. The study showed that this treatment could be administered up to 72 hours from the onset of symptoms for it to be effective. □