



## Management of Subarachnoid Hemorrhage in Two Important Italian Political Leaders: A Paradigm of Ethical and Technological Evolution of Neurosurgery During the Past Half-Century

Pierluigi Longatti<sup>1</sup>, Ermanno Giombelli<sup>2</sup>, Giacomo Pavesi<sup>3</sup>, Alessandro Carteri<sup>1</sup>, Alberto Feletti<sup>3</sup>

### Key words

- Cerebral aneurysm
- History of neurosurgery
- Italian
- Neurosurgery evolution
- Political leaders
- SAH

### Abbreviations and Acronyms

**MCA:** Middle cerebral artery

**SAH:** Subarachnoid hemorrhage

From the <sup>1</sup>Department of Neurosurgery, Treviso Hospital — University of Padova, Padova; <sup>2</sup>Department of Special Surgeries, Unit of Neurosurgery, University Hospital of Parma, Parma; and <sup>3</sup>Department of Neurosciences, Unit of Neurosurgery, NOCSAE Modena Hospital, Baggiovara, Italy

To whom correspondence should be addressed:

Alberto Feletti, M.D., Ph.D.

[E-mail: [alberto.feletti@gmail.com](mailto:alberto.feletti@gmail.com)]

Citation: *World Neurosurg.* (2016) 92:559-564.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2015.12.089>

Journal homepage: [www.WORLDNEUROSURGERY.org](http://www.WORLDNEUROSURGERY.org)

Available online: [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

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### INTRODUCTION

On January 5, 2014, Panorama, a wide-circulation Italian weekly magazine, ran the headline “Bersani and the Curse of the Communist Leaders—After Togliatti and Berlinguer, also Bersani Suffers a Brain Hemorrhage.”<sup>1</sup> Pier Luigi Bersani, the General Secretary of the Democratic Party, had suffered a subarachnoid hemorrhage (SAH) after the rupture of a middle cerebral artery (MCA) aneurysm. Why a curse? In a curious and extraordinary coincidence, 5 of 7 most relevant leaders of the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, which was established in 1921, has been the largest Communist Party in Western Countries) suffered a cerebral stroke (Table 1). This is an odd fate that even Lenin and Stalin, the top founders and leaders of the Soviet Union, did not escape. Stroke also seems to have plagued many Presidents of the United States, and not without political

consequences.<sup>2</sup> This observation, however, is a mere curiosity and does not represent the major theme of this article, nor has this coincidence seemed to have discouraged politicians from contesting the leadership of hon. Bersani’s Party.

Nowadays, when a political leader or a very important person is hospitalized, the public expects to receive thorough information regarding the patient. In contrast, in the past conventional medicine was very imaginative in avoiding certain words and adjectives, especially those indicating a lack of remedy, such as cancer, coma, heart attack, hemorrhage, etc. With better understanding of the disease progression and successful treatments, people have restored the real and less-terrifying meaning of these words. Such changes in both medical and social communication and disease management are highlighted by specific stories that narrate similar cases in different historical epochs. This train of thought is a good chance for neurosurgeons to trace the tremendous evolution that neurosurgery has undergone during the last half century.

Internal Medicine Department initially in Padova and later in Rome. In his memoirs, Cesare Frugoni writes about many of his patients, mostly renowned personalities between the 2 World Wars, such as King Fuad of Egypt, King Alphonse XIII of Spain, the musician and conductor Arturo Toscanini, the Nobel Prize Guglielmo Marconi, Benito Mussolini, and many other members of the jet society of that time.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, he was the doctor who managed the most critical illness of Palmiro Togliatti, the powerful 4 decade-lasting General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party (Figure 1). Togliatti’s neurosurgical story is very interesting and worthy of description. On July 14, 1948, in one of the most critical periods of the newly established Italian Republic, a young right-wing student attacked Togliatti. A bullet became lodged in the external occipital protuberance without penetrating the skull and was removed with no clinical consequences. To reassure millions of followers who were ready to unleash a communist revolution that would have radically changed the political geography of Europe after the Second World War, that evening Togliatti, lying on his bed in the Clinic, greeted his supporters despite his physical condition.

### CASE 1: PALMIRO TOGLIATTI

Professor Cesare Frugoni (1881–1978) was a famous clinician and the chairman of the

**Table 1.** General Secretaries of the Italian Communist Party—Democratic Party Diagnosed with Cerebrovascular Disease

Name	Years of Service as Secretary General	Year of Disease	Disease	Age, years	Age at Death, years
Amadeo Bordiga	1921–1924	1969	Cerebral stroke	80	81
Antonio Gramsci	1924–1927	1937	Cerebral hemorrhage	46	46
Palmiro Togliatti	1927–1964	1964	SAH	71	71
Luigi Longo	1964–1972	1968	Cerebral hemorrhage	68	80
Enrico Berlinguer	1972–1984	1984	Cerebral hemorrhage	62	62
Pier Luigi Bersani	2009–2013	2014	SAH	62	

SAH, subarachnoid hemorrhage.

Two years later, on August 22, 1950, he was involved in a car accident while on vacation. He suffered a head trauma with a frontal fracture and a fracture of the twelfth dorsal vertebra. After an initial spontaneous improvement, a progressive deterioration ensued. The neurologist Professor Ugo Cerletti (1877–1963, known for the invention of electroshock therapy for mental disturbances, and a member of the Italian Communist Party)<sup>4</sup> diagnosed Togliatti with a possible subdural chronic hematoma purely by clinical examination and suggested surgical evacuation. Professor Valdoni, Chair of General Surgery, and Professor Piero Frugoni performed the surgery in the private clinic “Villa Salus.” They made “four drillings, two on each side, that allowed

first to confirm the diagnosis of hematoma,” although we don’t know which side, “and to evacuate it, with such a wonderful and prompt result that hon. Togliatti, still on the operating bed, regained consciousness.”

On May 1, 1955, in the late morning of a very sunny day, hon. Togliatti was giving a lively and long political speech outdoors, bareheaded under the sun in Trieste. He suddenly noticed that he was not able to voluntarily move his right hand and immediately later he started vomiting and had a severe headache. After the injection of a pain reliever, he found the strength to take up the subject for a few minutes and conclude his speech. The chief of the Neurology and Psychiatry Department of Trieste, Professor Francesco Maria Donini, made the diagnosis of SAH after a lumbar puncture. Cesare Frugoni reports that “in the meantime the appropriate actions had been taken, but I did not want the word hemorrhage to be shown in the bulletin. Actually I did not consider appropriate to give too precise technical explanations because we were talking about a politician, whose future position had to be protected, also avoiding the use of words, as hemorrhage, that could have led to misunderstandings and incorrect assumptions.” Furthermore, he specifies “the location of the SAH is certainly intracranial, but its importance and implications are very different compared to a cerebral hemorrhage.” Nevertheless, Prof. C. Frugoni must have had some doubts about the correctness of his conduct because he added, “however, doctors who have carefully read the bulletin would have

certainly understood what the problem was” (*excusatio non petita...*). He also blamed the fact that “Togliatti and his collaborators did a serious imprudence when they decided to keep the speech outdoors, bareheaded under the sun.”

Nine years later, the 83-year-old Prof. C. Frugoni was on vacation in Switzerland when he received an urgent call. The 72-year-old hon. Togliatti was in deep coma after an apoplectic stroke in Yalta. Prof. C. Frugoni was asked to provide medical consultation to hon. Togliatti and travelled to Yalta with Communist Party officials. Yalta was the site of collective holidays organized by the Soviet State, where the fun was alternated by the acculturation of young people. Hon. Togliatti was in Yalta in this capacity. He was holding a conference in Russian to young pioneers of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, “also this time bareheaded and directly under the sun,” notes Prof. C. Frugoni: “Togliatti suffered a stroke exactly as in Trieste nine years before.” Prof. C. Frugoni and Prof. Mario Spallone, a fervent Communist and the personal doctor of hon. Togliatti, reported Togliatti’s neurosurgical history to their Russian colleagues, emphasizing the former intervention for the chronic subdural hematoma and the previous SAH. No warning sign had appeared in the previous days, when hon. Togliatti had been involved in writing the “Yalta Memorial” about the future of Communism in the Soviet Union and in Europe, which he had planned to discuss with Brezhnev.

Everything needed for medical care had been minutely prepared and functionally organized in one of the lodges for the young Communist Party of the Soviet Union pioneers. At 1 AM on August 19, 5 days after the event, the following medical bulletin was issued: “The general state of Comrade Togliatti endures severe. According to the program decided with the participation of Prof. Cesare Frugoni, a consultation was held with the neurosurgeon Prof. Alexei Arutiunov. An exploration of the cranial vault was decided for clarifying the subdural space. The intervention performed by Prof. Arutiunov was well tolerated. The post-operative course is normal at the moment.” Hon. Togliatti died on August 21. The number of resuscitations that were undertaken for 2 hours after his cardiac arrest, a length of time we would nowadays define as

**Figure 1.** Hon. Palmiro Togliatti.

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