

Prof. Francesco Puma: learning is like rowing upstream – not to advance is to drop back

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Editor's note

The Queen Mary Hospital (QMH) 2nd Thoracic Surgery Symposium was held on September 5, 2017, at Professorial Block, Queen Mary Hospital, Hong Kong, China, by the Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery, Queen Mary Hospital. An army of world-renowned experts in the field of thoracic surgery was invited to this highly effective and high-quality academic exchange platform where the experts co-studied a number of international cases, the state of the art and the latest scientific research of thoracic surgery. At the symposium, we had the honor to invite Prof. Francesco Puma (*Figure 1*), University of Perugia School of Medicine, Perugia, Italy, to have an exclusive interview with us.

Expert introduction

Francesco Puma, thoracic surgeon and professor, currently serves as the Director of the Department of Surgical and Biomedical Sciences, University of Perugia School of Medicine, Perugia, Italy. His research focuses are on mediastinal surgery, lung cancer, tracheal surgery, esophageal surgery, chest wall reconstruction and operative rigid bronchoscopy. He is a member of the following organizations: Cardiothoracic Surgery Network, European Society of Thoracic Surgeons, and Italian Society of Thoracic Surgery.

“When you are young and have to choose your future path, you meet with a variety of factors that influence your decision ...”, Prof. Puma recalled the moment when he set foot on the path of thoracic surgery, *“Fortunately I had my mentors who were decisive and stirred up my passion.”* As a matter of fact, thoracic surgery is a fascinating and variegated field of surgery. Within the field itself there are numerous subspecialties including airway surgery, surgery for esophageal cancer and esophageal functional disorders, lung transplantation and so on.

In the meantime, however, thoracic surgery can be technically challenging and demanding. The biggest



Figure 1 Prof. Francesco Puma was giving a speech at the QMH 2nd Thoracic Surgery Symposium.

challenge Prof. Puma encountered was introducing minimally invasive surgery to his clinical practice. Being away from the technical learning curve for years, he had to start all over again to pick up a brand new surgical approach. Despite facing tremendous challenge, he managed to get over it by sticking to one simple but important going principle—*“To offer patients what is best for them”*.

Speaking of how to provide patients with the best individualized treatment, Prof. Puma pointed out that one must adhere to the latest international guidelines while tailor-making an approach for a particular patient. A correct therapy should be standardized on the basis of the accepted protocols of treatment with multidisciplinary intervention and discussion. Physicians also have to take into account patient's functional conditions and the ratio between the required surgery and the patient's capacity to tolerate that surgery.

As a surgeon, Prof. Puma constantly meets a diversity of challenges at both surgical and technical levels. As a professor, he educates students every day while relentlessly conducting a series of scientific research. How can he strike a balance between all these?

Prof. Puma said, *“You cannot teach whatever you are not able to do.”* This is why he learns on an ongoing basis and



Figure 2 Interview with Prof. Francesco Puma: learning is like rowing upstream—not to advance is to drop back (1).

Available online: <http://www.asvide.com/article/view/25301>

strives for improvement, “*My team has been conducting clinical and experimental studies and reporting our clinical experience retrospectively. Each one of us has his own role. As the leader of my team, I am concerned about the professional growth of each member. I try to keep everyone motivated and, thus, we move forward together.*”

Prof. Puma concluded by giving three recommendations to young surgeons who would like to engage in the field of thoracic surgery: (I) be motivated if you would like to go on this path. This is no easy path after all; (II) be ready to travel around the world to take in new techniques and compare different treatment approaches; (III) keep learning till the day you retire, or even after you retire.

As the old saying goes, “*Learning is like rowing upstream—not to advance is to drop back.*” Facing the rapid advances of science and technology, we have to keep learning and applying technology in daily use to continuously improve ourselves. Not only does it apply to physicians, but to any one of us too.

For more details, please check out the interview video

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below (Figure 2).

Interview questions

- (I) What makes you interested in thoracic surgery?
- (II) What challenges have you met when you performed the thoracic surgeries?
- (III) Over the past decade, what has been the biggest advance in thoracic surgery?
- (IV) What factors have to be taken into account when you formulate an individualized approach for a particular patient?
- (V) How do you strike a balance among clinical work, teaching and research?
- (VI) What is your advice to younger surgeons who would like to engage in this field?

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Footnote

Conflicts of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

References

1. Li B. Interview with Prof. Francesco Puma: learning is like rowing upstream—not to advance is to drop back. *Asvide* 2018;5:558. Available online: <http://www.asvide.com/article/view/25301>

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