Adriano Chiò sighs wistfully down the telephone as he remembers his involvement in a court case in 2002. The case was into illicit drug use in Italian footballers and Chiò, a professor of neurology at the University of Turin (Turin, Italy) and founder of the Turin Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Centre, had been called in to investigate an incidental finding: a possible increased risk of ALS in professional players. To do so he was given unrestricted access to the records of every professional footballer in Italy between 1970 and 2001—a period spanning the careers of some of the game’s greats: Zoff, Rossi, Baresi, and Maldini. Chiò was over the moon. But not for the reasons you might think. “No, no, I don’t know so much about football”, he chuckles, saying he had to ask a friend what the players’ positions meant. “But it was incredible. I was given medical records, discharge data, and death certificates for 7300 people. There were no secrets—it was a proper epidemiological study! I wish I could work with a judge all the time.”

He found a six-fold increased risk of ALS in the footballers compared with the general population—an increased risk was also reported 2 years ago in American Footballers—but he hasn’t yet been able to pin down why. “We made lots of hypotheses and were confident we’d find out,” he says, “but we don’t know yet—maybe something to do with increased trauma?” Does the lack of answers bother him? “Yes and no”, he says. “But that’s what is so intriguing about ALS. There is so much mystery. So much to find out.”

Investigation into the link between the disease and playing sports was, after all, a brief sojourn from a career spent casting his net much wider. In 1995, 5 years after setting up the Turin ALS centre, he established The Piemonte and Valle d’Aosta Register for ALS (PARALS), a prospective registry collecting data for all patients with the disorder in the two northern regions of Italy. Thus far, the registry has collected data from more than 2600 patients and adds about 160 more every year. “Adriano has a brilliant, volcanic mind and an uncommon passion for his work”, says Gabriele Mora, the director of the ALS clinic of the Salvatore Maugeri Foundation in Milan and long-time collaborator of Chiò’s. “And thanks to this and his open character he won the trust of many Italian clinicians and researchers.”

Chiò is putting these data to good use. In a 2011 epidemiological study he showed that patients with ALS have distinctive and easily distinguishable clinical and prognostic characteristics based on their age and sex. He’s also used the data to build a transatlantic collaborative study with researchers at the US National Institutes of Health—the fruits of which were also borne in 2011 when the researchers helped to identify the C9orf72 mutation seen in 6–10% of patients with ALS. The mutation is also seen in 10–15% of patients with frontotemporal dementia.

“It’s a bridge between the two disorders”, he says, explaining that he is excited about what the increasing availability of low-cost, high throughput gene sequencing will mean for the unravelling of such connections.

It was an odd career choice to become a clinician-researcher for a man who swore at an early age he’d never be a doctor. The son of a general practitioner in a small mountain village near Turin, Chiò grew up with his father on call for 24-hours a day. He remembers his father being called out at all hours of the night—come wind, rain, or snow—and having to scale mountains as high as 1200 m in his car to visit patients. “I thought it must be very difficult to be a doctor if you have to do all that”, he says. “But when I was in my last year of high school I was very interested in biology, and also very interested in humanity, so I thought becoming a doctor allowed me to combine both my interests. My father was always very happy and maybe subconsciously he taught me that it is beautiful to be a doctor. And he was right: it is.”

Chiò says he remembers every one of his patients. “They all teach you something different”, he says, “about their disease characteristics but also about their personality characteristics.” This love of his work and those around him is remembered fondly by Roberto Mutani, Professor Emeritus of Neurology, University of Turin, who was Chiò’s mentor through medical school. “Since the beginning I’ve become aware of how Adriano is genuinely interested in people”, he says. “Though he is the smartest pupil he is the smartest pupil and colleague I’ve ever had in my life, his full absence of pomposity never makes people feel uneasy with him. It is always a deep pleasure for anybody to share with him discussions about and beyond science.”

Here Mora agrees: “Unlike most colleagues who have interests rather limited to their work, Adriano is a man of great culture”. Chiò, by his own admission, is not a physically active man, although he does enjoy walking in the mountains near his house in Turin. His leisure time activity of choice is staying at home and satisfying his interest in reading the history books that line his walls and flicking through the collection he is most fond of: his stamp collection.

“I’m an avid philatelist”, he says. “Apart from my work, this is my other love; I’ve been collecting stamps since I was 10 years old. My love of medical information started 6 years later and I’ve been collecting both ever since—perhaps this is why I don’t know too much about football!” He is still chuckling as he puts down the phone.

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