



**GARDEN D'AGOSTINO PRIZE**  
FOR INNOVATIVE RESEARCH IN HEMATOLOGICAL RARE DISEASES

**Sebastiano D'Agostino (1933-2024)**  
Vision, Innovation and Public Service in Healthcare



## 1. Introduction

The professional career of Sebastiano D'Agostino, reconstructed through correspondence, articles, public documents and personal notes preserved by him, offers a compelling narrative of over forty years of public healthcare in Sicily.

His career developed during a period of profound transformation: from the 1950s and 1960s, marked by structural imbalances and a legal and administrative model often rooted in outdated frameworks, to the period of change ushered in by the 1978 Healthcare Reform, and finally to the unresolved difficulties and new challenges of the 1990s.

Against this backdrop, D'Agostino emerged as a figure capable of combining strategic vision, organisational innovation and a sense of civic duty. His choices were distinguished by capacity to discern the needs of the time and translate them into concrete solutions.

His entire career was marked by a constant commitment to promoting organisational innovation and quality healthcare services, placing the patient at the centre, in an environment characterised by inertia and administrative difficulties that highlighted much more his ethical strength and consistency of method.

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## 2. Education and early career (1958-1969)

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On 14 July 1958, he graduated in Medicine and Surgery from the University of Catania and obtained his professional qualification. In the same year, he started his career at the Italian Red Cross in Palermo, working as a laboratory assistant in support of various hospitals, including the *Villa Sofia Whitaker Hospital* and the Regional Blood Transfusion Centre.

At that time, these were amongst the most distinguished institutions in southern Italy. In 1961, he won the national competition for Provincial Medical Officer and was assigned first to Genoa and then to Palermo. At the same time, he obtained three specialisations: Legal and Insurance Medicine (Palermo, 1961), Hygiene (Genoa, 1963) and Hygiene, Technique and Hospital Management (Messina, 1967).

From 1964 to 1969, he worked at the Sicilian Regional Health Department as Regional Health Inspector. Here, he launched the first systematic investigations into the state of Sicilian hospitals, which formed the basis for the Regional Hospital Plan, developing a methodological approach to health planning based on data and technical analysis.

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## 3. Regional health planning: the systemic approach

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At the Regional Health Department, D'Agostino realised that the development of health policy should be founded upon robust evidence derived from rigorous investigations and research, rather than on sporadic observations or local preferences.

In December 1966 he published, with A. Messina, the study *Aspetti organizzativi degli ospedali generali in Sicilia* (Organisational aspects of general hospitals in Sicily) (Edizioni Grafindustria Editoriale - Palermo), the result of a vast technical and organisational survey of the main hospitals on the island. The approach was innovative for its time: collection of structural and functional data, comparison with more advanced national realities and analysis of hospital productivity. In essence, it was a method that anticipated modern health planning based on empirical evidence and performance indicators.

The survey was not limited to counting beds, but examined the functionality of the wards, logistics (with representation of general and detailed floor plans), equipment, laboratories and the qualifications of all healthcare personnel. The results were unfavorable: obsolete facilities – mostly consisting of "*old, decrepit health factories*" – serious shortages of equipment and qualified personnel, concentration of services in a few urban centres with vast uncovered areas, and the absence of a unified plan capable of ensuring equitable access to care. The conclusion was both an indictment and a proposal: it was necessary to "*remedy the marked gap in the level of healthcare between the South and mainland Italy*".

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This first and fundamental survey was followed by other equally important contributions to the definition of an orderly plan for the development of Sicilian healthcare. These included the study *Considerazioni in tema di programmazione ospedaliera della Città di Palermo* (Considerations on hospital planning in the city of Palermo, November 1968), written together with colleagues N. Mineo and G. Palazzotto, and the monograph *Indagine sullo stato attuale dei P.A.S.S. e dei Poliambulatori con sosta costruiti dalla Regione Siciliana* [Survey on the current state of the Health and Social Care Centres and Polyclinics with parking facilities built by the Sicilian Region] (August 1968), which analysed building conditions, the use of the properties, the availability of equipment and the financial requirements for the necessary interventions.

The condition of psychiatric hospitals appeared particularly dramatic. In a personal note (undated), he wrote:

***We can't continue to regard the mentally ill as incomprehensible and, as such, dangerous and unpredictable, leaving them with no other option than civil death. It is necessary to work towards [their] reintegration into society, which is only delayed by the sluggishness of the welfare system, stemming from the absurd preconception that [they] are beyond recovery.***

This perspective was very much in line with the philosophy that, years later, would inspire the Basaglia reform (1978): a healthcare model based on technical criteria and social justice, which rejected the 'civil death' of psychiatric patients. In his personal library, he kept a copy of *L'istituzione negata* by Franco Basaglia (1967), with numerous underlined passages and marginal notes, a work he valued so highly that he encouraged his sons to read it even when they were very young.

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## 4. Health Management and Hospital Transformation (1970-1994)

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From 1970, Sebastiano D'Agostino held interim Medical Director positions at the V. Cervello Hospital and the E. Albanese Orthopaedic Hospital in Palermo, until he won the competition that led him to head the Cervello Hospital from 1972 to 1994.

The story of this hospital stands as the most tangible expression of his visionary approach. Founded in 1905 and opened in 1909 as a public sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis, it preserved its original vocation for several decades.

Under his direction, D'Agostino recognised that, with tuberculosis admissions in decline and new therapies emerging, the Sanatorium needed to be transformed into a modern hospital.

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This marked the turning point: he began the transformation of the hospital from a sanatorium to a general hospital, which evolved into a centre of multidisciplinary excellence, hosting leading units in Cardiology, Haematology, Hepatology, and Obstetrics and Gynaecology, while retaining its distinguished expertise in non-tuberculosis pulmonology.

In a technical report dated April 1976, he summarised his concept as follows:

***The modern hospital can't limit its services to the physio-pathological investigation of a single organ or system. It must offer comprehensive care, capable of restoring well-being and educating people about how to protect their health.***

A strategic element of the transformation was the agreements with the medical faculties of Sicilian universities, which D'Agostino identified and promoted as a means of attracting and enhancing the best skills, filling the shortage of specialised staff and motivating those already present.

The first agreement with the University of Palermo, signed on 14 February 1972 and subsequently renewed, inaugurated an innovative model of integration between healthcare, research and teaching. The success of the model was the outcome of a joint collaboration between institutions, academics, and hospital staff. At the same time, the Hospital opened up to the professional market, selecting high-profile specialists according to meritocratic criteria and initiating a process of organisational renewal that was ahead of its time.

Under his leadership, the Cervello Hospital was enriched with new, cutting-edge divisions and departments, often entrusted to 'associate' or 'appointed' university professors of scientific prestige even at an international level. It also hosted several medical specialisation schools, which consolidated its role as a regional and national reference point not only in healthcare, but also in scientific research and clinical trials (e.g., in assisted fertilisation).

In 1978, D'Agostino promoted the opening of a School for Professional Nurses, convinced that paramedical staff were the backbone of a hospital's operational functionality. The initiative remained active until 1997, when it was replaced by university courses for nursing professions.

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## 5. Organisational innovation and emergency management (1994-2000)

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In September 1994, D'Agostino stepped down as Medical Director of the V. Cervello Hospital, in a context marked by management difficulties and internal and external tensions that could have limited the hospital's full potential. From that moment on, a new phase of his career began, dedicated to the reorganisation of hospitals in the province and, above all, to the management of health emergencies.

From 1996 to 2000, he was Head of Sector of Local Health Unit No. 6 in Palermo, with responsibility for coordinating public and private hospitals throughout the province. In this role, he oversaw the experimental launch of the 118 Emergency and Helicopter Rescue Service, organising the operations centre, coordinating vehicles and selecting healthcare operators.

In this role, D'Agostino provided technical and organisational support to several hospitals. Rather than taking a uniformly bureaucratic approach, he tailored solutions to the specific features and challenges of each context.

At the G.F. Ingrassia Hospital in Palermo, he developed and led the organisation of a modern Emergency Department and an advanced Intensive Care Service, which enabled the hospital to rank among the city's general hospitals. At the Giglio Hospital in Cefalù, he helped to redefine the technical and care project, proposing the replacement of the old structure with a new building complex that was logistically more suitable and technologically advanced.

In other hospitals in the province - Partinico, Termini Imerese, Trapani and Canicattì - his intervention resulted in concrete solutions for redevelopment and reorganisation, aimed at optimising resources and functionality. His mark was evident in this method: not decisions imposed from above, but the operational translation of a healthcare vision capable of adapting to different problems with appropriate tools.

His expertise was also recognised at an institutional level: with Regional Decree No. 15205 of 1998, he was appointed a member of the Regional Health Planning Committee of the Sicilian Region, contributing his technical expertise to the definition of public health development guidelines for Sicily.

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## 6. Healthcare reform and critical reflections

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He welcomed the 1978 reform establishing the National Health Service as an opportunity for rationalisation and social equity, yet he was not reticent in expressing criticism.

In an article in the *Giornale di Sicilia* on 8 June 1977, on the eve of the reform, he developed a severe reflection on the health policies followed in Sicily up to that point and on the waste resulting from unfinished or poorly located hospitals, warning that only a rational use of resources and the full use of already operational facilities could guarantee equity and efficiency.

Almost half a century later, shortly before his death, he returned to the subject in an article published on 24 March 2024, again in the *Giornale di Sicilia*, significantly entitled *A National Service reduced to a jungle: it is twilight*.

In it, he expressed his complete disillusionment with the way the reform had been implemented and continuously adapted. Looking back, he wondered what remained of the health reforms of the 1970s, once considered a model even abroad, in the face of structural problems: endless waiting lists, patients accommodated in emergency room corridors, exasperatingly slow diagnostics, widespread precariousness among young doctors and their growing flight to the private sector or abroad.

D'Agostino attributed these problems to the inattention of political forces, unable to decisively address public health issues, dragged into what he called the *"twilight phase, the antechamber of deep darkness"*. It was a bitter conclusion, testimony to his disappointment at the failed promises of reform, but also to his civic passion, which remained intact until the very end.

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## 7. Latest projects

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After his retirement (2000), Sebastiano D'Agostino continued to propose strategic projects.

In May 2001, he was appointed Delegate of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Palermo for memoranda of understanding with the Sicilian Region. In September 2002, he wrote to the Dean of the Faculty proposing the creation of a Research Centre for Gene Therapy to tackle genetic diseases - widespread in Sicily - which forced many families to undertake *"journeys of hope"*.

In his letter, he emphasised that the potential co-founding institutions - the University Polyclinic and Cervello Hospital - already had the necessary equipment, building resources and, above all, the medical expertise of 'passionate scholars', backed by established collaborative relationships with prestigious international centres. All that was needed, he observed, was *'to enable them to interact within clearly logistically defined contexts'*.

Also in 2002, together with a group of specialists, he promoted a consortium of healthcare companies to create a permanent training centre for Sicilian doctors, aimed at preventing a decline in skills in a rapidly evolving sector. Although the project was not realised, it paved the way for the creation, in April 2004, of the Cervello Hospital Medical-Scientific Library, equipped with state-of-the-art documentary and digital resources, of which he became Honorary President of the Scientific Commission, directed by Prof. Aurelio Maggio since 2007.