



## Passing on the baton

→ Alberto Costa ■ GUEST EDITOR

**T**wenty-five years ago, a wealthy Italian industrialist who had been undergoing treatment for arthritis for a year found out that he was in fact suffering from prostate cancer, which had metastasised to the bone. He sought out Umberto Veronesi, Italy's leading cancer doctor, and told him that he wished to prevent the same delay in diagnosis happening to others.

"Everybody wants to give money to cancer research and have their name engraved on a plate on a machine or on the door of a science laboratory. I want to invest in education, in the transfer of knowledge and experience for people to be diagnosed earlier and be treated better," he said.

He had come to the right man. As it happened, Veronesi had been thinking along the same lines for some time, and had the blueprint for exactly such an educational initiative in his back pocket. Later the same year, the European School of Oncology was established in Milan (see Spotlight, p 40, for the full story).

That was back in the early '80s, when the concept of CME (continuing medical education) was still in its infancy in Europe. But it was becoming clear even then that, with basic science developing at an increasing speed, doctors could no longer continue practising all their lives counting exclusively on what they had learned for their medical degree.

Twenty-five years on, CME has become

compulsory in most EU countries and patients know the importance of having an up-to-date doctor. However, this is not something governments invest in.

So while there are now hundreds of courses, seminars and congresses available, 85–90% of them are dependent on commercial sponsorship, and they are therefore biased towards topics that big money has an interest in. Paediatric cancers, less common cancers, novel surgical techniques and developments in cancer nursing are among the subjects that tend to be overlooked.

It is also hard to know whether the interests of commercial sponsors may influence the content of the courses they help fund.

ESO's financial independence has allowed us to set our own agenda, led by our motto Learning to Care – 'learning' as a continuous process, a state of mind, a tribute to curiosity; 'care' as awareness that patients need the right treatments, but they also need empathy, they need to be heard, and they need to share knowledge.

Independent unbiased medical education is needed now as much as ever, and as Europe continues to expand, the goal of spreading educational opportunities to reach every centre where cancer patients are treated becomes more important, because every cancer patient deserves an unbiased and knowledgeable doctor.

Birthday postcards are welcome.

*Alberto Costa is Director of the European School of Oncology*