

Acceptance Speech  
**Umberto Veronesi**  
CoF Winner of King Faisal International Prize  
For medicine 2003/1423H.

Tuesday 8.3.2003 (15.1.1423H)

Your Highness, Your Excellencies, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen...

I am extremely proud and most honoured to have been chosen as one of the recipients of the King Faisal International prize for Medicine for the year two thousand and three. The prize is an internationally recognised one of great prestige, and is an eloquent testimony to the increasingly active participation of the Arab world in scientific development and medical advance, as well as an expression of the awareness of Islamic and Arab culture of the primal importance of the using science to benefit humanity.

Scientists in the West are well aware of the major contributions of Arab culture to the development of science and the birth of medical science. We are aware of the fundamental contribution of Arab scholars during the what are often referred to as the “Dark Ages” in Europe. During this periods of European decline after the disintegration of the Roman Civilisation, scholars in the Arab world conserved and translated the ancient writings, developed and refined the method of clinical observation, and made important contributions to chemistry and pharmacology, and also to mathematics.

But, in addition to being wise and faithful conservers of the body of classical Greek medical knowledge, they were also innovators, and creative developers. The contributions of Arab scholars to the then unnamed fields of psychology and psychosomatic medicine were magnificent.

The names of many of the illustrious figures of Medieval Islamic science and medicine are well known among Western scholars, although often the names themselves have been modified or “westernised”. It is to Al-Razi, for example, that we are indebted to the first scientific descriptions of smallpox and of measles. We know of Abul Qasim, who wrote one of the first treatises on surgery. This treatise, incidentally, also included detailed descriptions of over a hundred surgical instruments.

And then of course there is Ibn Sina, usually known in the West as Avicenna.– the most celebrated Arab physician active at the beginning of the first millennium. His book on medicine – The Cannon of Medicine (or *al-Qanun fi at-tibb*) – was the principal medical text-book in Europe from the twelfth to the sixteenth century.

We know too of Ibn Rushd (or Averroes). His work *the Kulliyat*, was the greatest medical encyclopaedia of the twelfth century.

The supreme mission, to which the world scientific community must be dedicated, is that of inculcating and promoting a love for knowledge and an appreciation of the value of medical science. In order to successfully combat disease and ill health, humanity must abandon the worn-out cultural models of negation, dismissal, escape, and fatalism – which fact are only the spawn of fear and ignorance – and rekindle confidence in our ability to vanquish suffering by using the methods of science – that is the disinterested search for truth and the free exchange of knowledge.

The benefits of scientific research are well exemplified in the discipline of oncology and the progress it has made in treating and curing several

cancers. In particular breast cancer. Breast cancer is one of the most common and one of the most dangerous diseases affecting women. And it is a disease whose incidence seems to be increasing world-wide. Over the last twenty years medical science has made enormous progress in the treatment of this disease. One aspect of this progress is that breast cancer is now diagnosed at an increasingly early stage in more and more women. And when diagnosed early, it is curable in a high percentage of cases. But not only that. Today, women who are stricken by this disease are not only completely cured more often than in the past, but can be cured using treatments which avoid the severe surgical mutilation that was a feature of the past. Therefore they are able to enjoy a much better quality of life after they have been cured.

The King Faisal Prize which has generously been awarded to me is a recognition of the progress that has been made in conserving the integrity of the body of the woman who develops cancer, and, more generally, a recognition of the progress that has been made in developing conservative – non-mutilating – surgical techniques for treating many-many other cancers.

Initiatives like this Prize encourage the innovative spirit of free scientific thought and promote free and creative research everywhere. It is this research that bears the most wholesome fruits, contributing positively to alleviating suffering of humanity. This research also contributes to promoting, in the global community, the ethical precepts that characterise all that is best in the world of science, and which are the most advanced expression of the potential of the human intellect.

It is, in fact, the scientific world that is making the most important contribution to the creation of a multicultural world community.

Scientists from all countries and cultures are working together at this moment to improve the lives of men and women throughout the world, irrespective of culture or politics, race or creed. The King Faisal prize is a concrete contribution to that world community.

And it has a special significance at this difficult time of world tension. I believe that the King Faisal prize also demonstrates that science is able to build bridges, and establish more efficient communication, between different civilisations, to contribute to easing political tensions, simply by pursuing, autonomously and freely, its great objective of promoting progress and benefiting humanity.

Umberto Veronesi