Cardiology in the Young

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Joseph Vincent De Giovanni

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Obituary

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Joseph Vincent De Giovanni, a pioneering Paediatric and Adult Congenital Cardiologist, died on 8 May, 2023 at the age of 74 years, after a short illness. Jo was born on 15 March, 1949 in Malta to Andrew and Josephine De Giovanni. Josephine was a talented seamstress creating beautiful wedding dresses who passed on her creative talent to him. Andrew was a Civil Servant working for the British Armed Forces in Malta. Jo grew up with his sister Barbara who was a year older than him (Figs 1 and 2). They were close and supported each other throughout their lives. As a child, Jo was fascinated by how machinery worked and so he dismantled articles such as watches just to see how they work.

He joined medical school in Malta in 1968. He enjoyed anatomy and won an award for anatomy dissection (Fig 3).

He took part in various medical and non-medical events representing his medical school (Fig 4). As a young medical student, his other interests included swimming and fishing. He was a good artist and loved drawing and painting. He qualified from the University of Malta in 1973 (Fig 5).

Jo met Josette in junior college in Malta. They studied Physics, Chemistry, and Biology at A levels together. They tied the knot in 1974 in Malta (Fig 6).

Jo arrived in the UK on a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1975 for a year to study cardiology. He started working in the UK with Professor Pentecost at the General Hospital in Birmingham. After a year, he realised that he needed to stay longer to learn all he wanted to and so he went on to complete his training in the UK. He also worked at the Royal Brompton Hospital for a year. He worked at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Adult Cardiology and then at the Birmingham Children's Hospital in Paediatric Cardiology as a senior registrar before he was appointed as consultant at Birmingham Children's Hospital in 1983 (Fig 7).

He was present for the birth of our specialty of interventional paediatric cardiology and drove many of the innovations, which are taken for granted now. He was also at the forefront of introducing new techniques to the Birmingham unit, such as transvenous pacing in 1981, blade atrial septostomy in 1982, balloon angioplasty in 1983, myocardial biopsy in children in 1984, and electrophysiology studies in 1985. Since then, he has regularly introduced new techniques and technology to the unit. He built the Adult Congenital Department at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and developed the Adult Congenital Interventional services. He also worked closely with the adult cardiologists and was particularly interested in post-infarct ventricular septal defect closure with devices. He travelled around the country and helped other operators to close the post-infarct VSDs in sick patients, whenever a colleague or friend asked him for help, even in the middle of the night and accumulated a large experience in this area.

Jo was committed to help, teach and promote all the new techniques in many countries around the world, both developing and developed countries. He contributed enormously to similar developments in his native Malta. He was awarded the Order of Merit by the President of Malta in 1994 for setting up cardiac services and training the staff in Malta (Fig 8). He was also made Visiting Professor of the University of Malta in 2013 (Fig 9).

Jo was a very kind doctor who kept the interests of his patients at the forefront. He developed techniques to treat conditions that previously did not have treatments. He was an inspirational mentor, and generations of paediatric cardiologists are better for knowing him. He published on the various techniques and outcomes and despite being a busy full-time clinician, he has almost 200 publications, with over 5000 citations, a track record many full-time researchers would be proud of. He gave over 600 lectures at national and international meetings. He was highly respected by paediatric cardiologists all around the world and was invited regularly as a faculty member and invited speaker at conferences from the United States of America to Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Far East. Jo always gave his time selflessly in teaching practical interventional procedures, in particular in the developing countries, to help bring their services up to modern levels. He went out of his way to make himself available to help them, whenever they asked for his help.

Jo was known to be a sharp observer and very witty with great interpersonal skills. He usually had his catheter list on a Thursday including about 4–5 patients with a flight to catch the same evening usually for a conference. On one occasion, in the cardiac catheter laboratory, Jo's phone rang at about 5 pm with the caller identifying himself as a pilot of the flight, which Jo was supposed to catch. He was checking on Dr Giovanni's progress to see whether he had left for the

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Figure 1. Jo as a toddler.



Figure 2. Jo with his family.

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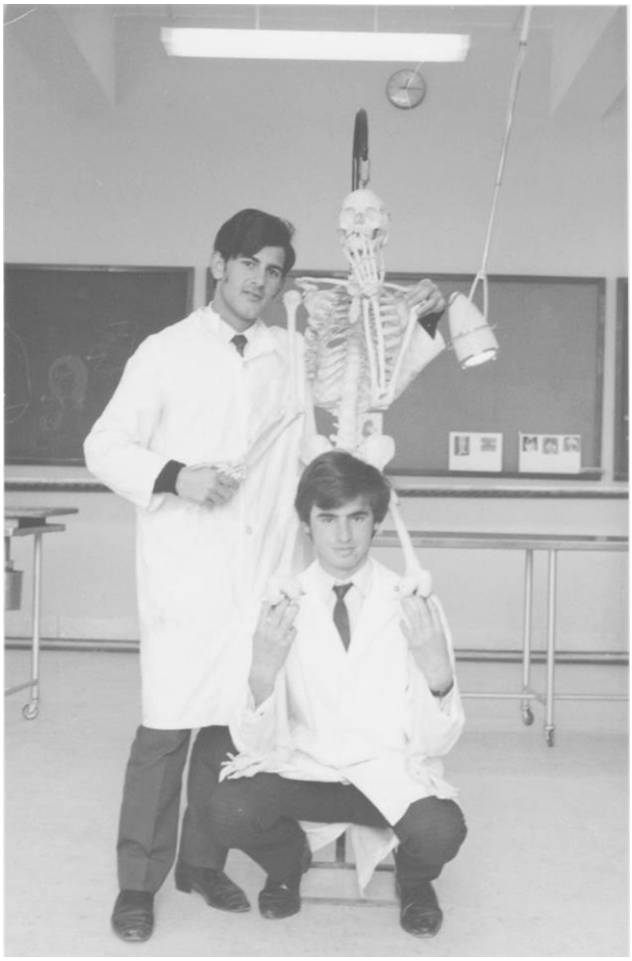


Figure 3. Young medical student learning surface anatomy.



Figure 4. First conference representing Malta at the International Federation of Medical Students Association in Paris 1970.

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Figure 5. Graduation Convocation ceremony.



Figure 6. Tying the knot 1974.

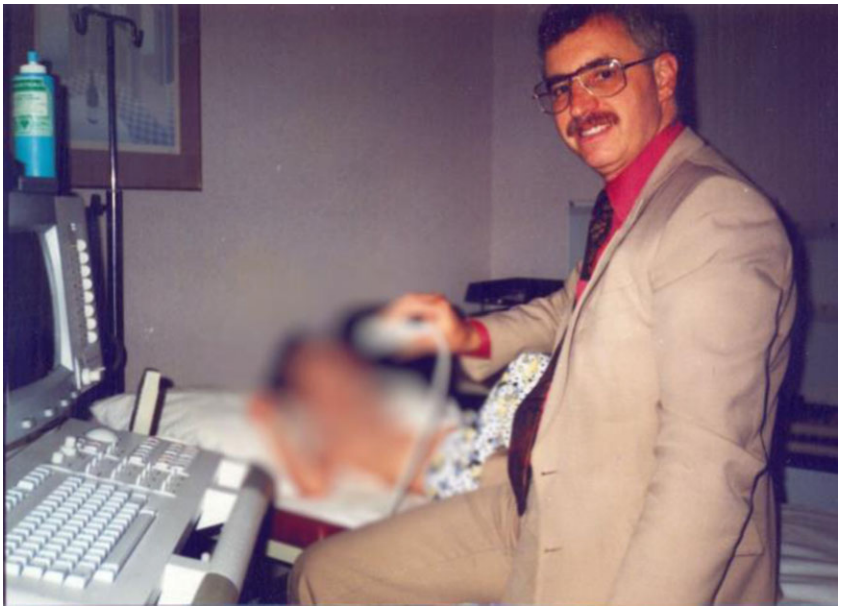


Figure 7. Working at Birmingham Children's Hospital.

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Figure 8. Receiving Order of Merit from President of Malta.



Figure 9. Receiving professorship from University of Malta.

airport and was asking for Jo's permission to start the engines. It turned out to be the anaesthetist who was playing a prank by calling from the other room. We all had a good laugh including Jo who had not realised that he was being a victim of a prank.

Jo was elected Scientific Secretary of the Association for European Paediatric and Congenital Cardiology (AEPC) between 2007 and 2012. He was awarded the PICS Achievement Award in the United States of America as well as the Lifetime Achievement

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Figure 10. Boating, one of his passion.

Award by British Congenital Cardiac Association in 2015, and he became an Honorary Member of AEPC for his contribution to the field of paediatric cardiology.

Outside work, he enjoyed playing tennis. He loved exploring nature and went with his family on walks at the weekends. He loved boats and enjoyed fishing and skiing and enjoyed painting when he had some spare time (Fig. 10). He also loved travelling and immersing in different cultures and enjoyed the opportunities abroad that were offered. He loved Italy. He also enjoyed painting and towards the end enjoyed painting scenes from the England, France, Italy, and Malta in a monochrome theme with some areas coloured. They are very distinctive and expressive pieces. He also got into cooking and really enjoyed creating Asian/North African dishes. Most of all, he greatly enjoyed spending quality time with his grandchildren. He also enjoyed gardening and at the end of a hard working day, he would somehow find time to go to the greenhouse to attend to his plants. After retirement, he grew a vegetable plot at the end of his garden

Over the last few years, he fought his terminal illness with great determination and fortitude. He was an extraordinary man and an extraordinary cardiologist. He sadly passed away peacefully surrounded by his family on 8 May, 2023. He was always a family first man and leaves behind his wife Josette and children (son, Mark, and daughters, Claudia, and Daniela) and eight grandchildren. He will be terribly missed by all his family, friends, and colleagues all around the world. Rest in peace Jo, we will all miss you.

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