

In the nick of time

BY PIO BARONE LUMAGA

Doctor Charles Randquist saved my life. Someone may say I'm a drama queen, you just removed a dark spot of your skin, but after an apparently uneventful small cut I got to know how close I have been to death.







I'm not a pink Englishman in East Hampton, but an Italian in Stockholm who has just learned that 2,000 persons are affected every year by malignant melanoma, a degenerative skin cancer that kills more Swedes than traffic accidents do. If the tumour is detected and surgically removed early, the chances of a complete recovery are very large. In cases where the cancer is detected late and it has begun to spread, one may need chemotherapy, but if the cancer has spread extensively, the prognosis is very poor, and relatively

few survive. Exposure to the sun's rays is a decisive factor in its development.

Let's re-wind back to the Italy of the sixties, where there simply wasn't any awareness about suntan and sun protection, a period when our three-month-long childhood summers were spent on the beach. My grandmother prepared appetizing lunch baskets so that the large tribe of siblings and cousins could be on the waterfront from morning to sunset, playing all day long on the rocky beach of Minor, in and out of the

water. If we got burned, and we did indeed, we would be cured with oil mixed with lemon and yogurt. The lemon would of course hurt like hell, but grandmother would say that lemon cures everything, and unmoved by our protest she cleaned even our eyes with lemon.

And our sun protection would be nothing else than olive oil. You can imagine. I spent a great deal of my first twenty-five years on or by the sea as a fisherman and sailor under a scorching sun. Those were times that left quite an imprint on my skin. Naively, I thought my skin was



hardened by being scorched – red skin, burning, shedding yellowish dead skin, new pink skin surfacing – and once this painful ritual at the beginning of the summer was over, I felt protected for the rest of the season.

Aging, I started to get liver spots, but, since the process was gradual, I didn't give them particular attention. One day my wife looked at me and said: 'Maybe you should check out the dark shade over your right eyebrow.'

I felt bad, I thought it was a dig: a polite way of

saying you don't look good. Then some time passed and a friend said almost the same, adding that he knew a fantastic plastic surgeon. He emphasized that I should go there since you don't want a scar on your face. Now I really felt bad – if a friend suggests a plastic surgeon I must really look ugly. However hesitantly, I heeded the advice and, somewhat apprehensively, entered Victoriakliniken.

It didn't look like a hospital, was more akin to a sophisticated spa, minimal and elegant. During the

visit, Doctor Randquist communicated that he wanted to check all my body to examine the state of my skin. I became tense. I knew that my body was full of spots. And sure enough he found another spot in a place I couldn't see. He said that the one on my face was not dangerous but the one on the back of my leg had to be removed as soon as possible. 'But, Doctor, when?' I asked, reluctant. He smiled: 'Call me Charles. How about right now?'

My quite big liver spot was gently scraped away,

but the other one required a deep incision and stitches, with both specimens sent to the lab for a check. He saw that I was nervous and started to talk with me about different things. I learned that the best part of his work was to know people and be able to make a difference in their lives. The relation never ends once you taken care of a physical change in a person's life, whether it is about removing a possible tumour or giving a woman a better breast to improve her self esteem.

A few days later I received a morning phone call from Charles: the spot on my leg was a malign melanoma at a very early stage, and with great probability was an isolated case. He would, at any rate, like to meet me at my earliest convenience, check the scar, re-examine my entire body and answer all my questions. I took it quite coolly, and he suggested that I should re-schedule my appointments and meet him in a couple of hours – OK?

– OK.

At the clinic, the spacious waiting room seemed to me to be more crowded than usual, but I had only the time to drink half of my coffee before being ushered into one of the surgical rooms where he was waiting; after a thorough examination under bright lights and magnifying glasses nothing else was found and the scar was healing perfectly. He suggested a strategy of attention, and in the subsequent years I have met him on a regular basis.

Now, after four years, and a dozen spots removed, still the bad one remains an isolated episode. I have started even to look forward to our meetings, usually at the end of his/my working day, with a cup of tea chatting about art or modern architecture, two subjects about which we are passionate.

But the story does not end here... ■

