

OBITUARY



ESMO pays tribute to Professor José Baselga

It is with deep sadness that ESMO has learnt of the death of Professor José Baselga, renowned for his outstanding contributions in advancing cancer science, treatment and care for countless patients across the globe, leaving an enduring legacy for years to come.

His work as President of ESMO (2008-2009) triggered the focused developments that have made ESMO the society it is today, with a strategic plan which changed the organisation for the better, inspired by his enthusiasm and hard work.¹

Looking at his legacy, the current ESMO President, Professor Solange Peters, said: 'Undoubtedly a giant of oncology, one of the most innovative scientists, an amazing mentor for so many cancer professionals. He gave a lot to cancer research, cancer professionals and cancer patients: now we all must continue his legacy.'

Among his major contributions to the advancement of cancer research was the development of targeted agents for the treatment of breast cancer and strategies to overcome mechanisms of resistance. His clinical studies led to the approval of trastuzumab, pertuzumab and everolimus, three drugs which are considered life-changing medicines.²⁻⁵

Baselga's work was built on his passion for medical knowledge and the importance of the biological basis of cancer, a field that looked promising to him many years before the human genome was even deciphered, some of his colleagues have noted.^{6,7}

He strongly defended the need for innovative, selective anticancer treatments, which differentiate malignant and non-malignant cells, as a key approach to increase efficacy with lower toxicity than conventional therapies.^{8,9} Moreover, he worked tirelessly to translate the best science into the best care, bringing precision medicine to the clinic.¹⁰

In 2005, Baselga was granted the ESMO Award and in 2017 he received the ESMO Lifetime Achievement Award for his crucial role in breast cancer drug development, for being arguably the godfather of translational cancer research, having consequently advanced precision cancer science and medicine for the benefit of patients, not only in his home country, Spain, but throughout Europe and at the international level.

Baselga created a multidisciplinary unit for cancer care at Vall d'Hebron University Hospital and founded a research programme for preclinical, clinical and translational studies to get the latest advances in the field accessible to the patients who need them.

As president of the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), of the Vall d'Hebron Institute of Oncology's (VHIO's) International Scientific Committee and the FERO Foundation, and Professor of Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College and Harvard Medical School, Baselga shared his contagious determination to advance cancer science and improve patient care with the oncology community and future generations.

At the time of his passing, Baselga was head of oncology research and development and a senior member of the executive team at AstraZeneca. Before that, he was Physician-in-Chief at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK). Before MSK, Baselga was the Chief of the Division of Hematology/Oncology, Associate Director of the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center. He was also the Chairman of Medical Oncology and Founding Director of the VHIO in Barcelona, Spain. He was a member of the Board of Directors for the American Society of Clinical Oncology, an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine, the American Society of Clinical Investigation, the Association of American Physicians and a Fellow of the AACR Academy. He was member of the Editorial Boards of *Cancer Cell*, the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* and *Clinical Cancer Research*, and founding editor-in-chief for the AACR flagship journal *Cancer Discovery*.

Looking back at his contribution in the field, Professor Tabernero, who worked closely with Baselga and has known him for years, said: 'We have lost an extraordinary person, passionate about everything he did, particularly when it came to his profession, medicine, and his family. His hard work only compared with his compassion towards cancer patients, to whom he directed his enthusiasm and courage to fight against the disease'.

On the day of his passing, thousands of colleagues, patients' associations and individual patients expressed their sadness via social media, where he was remembered for his leadership, brilliance and passion for bringing better therapies to patients. He has been referred to as 'one of the true giants in oncology' who shaped modern cancer research and care and saved so many lives.

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