Older patient and geriatric patient.
Medicine of complexity
Paziente anziano, paziente geriatrico

U. Senin
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This book, by Umberto Senin, represents an anomalous example of a medical textbook, just like Geriatrics is indeed itself an anomalous – or, at least, peculiar – clinical discipline. It is not a textbook of a discipline that assumes to be an exact science. Rarely is Geriatrics such a science, and most of the time it is something else. It is a discipline that requires passion, ethical motivation and often the willingness to choose, from among several solutions, the less “scientific” one; at the same time, a solid scientific background is mandatory, possibly more so than in other disciplines. The physician makes a commitment that implies the willingness to fight and protest, sometimes to the point of being defeated. Senin’s book represents the most authentic and passionate interpretation of this complex vocation. And sometimes it is far from being reassuring, as a medical textbook is able to be. This happens, for example, when classic Medicine draws precise pathways to achieve the correct diagnosis, whilst Geriatrics commonly faces issues coming from different, frequently non-clinical, sources. Similarly, Medicine dictates the treatment of choice, whilst in Geriatrics the choice of a therapeutic approach is, as a rule, strongly individualised; in this perspective, it must also value less effective, yet more feasible, treatments. In other words, Umberto Senin’s book is not a rigid algorithm-based manual, but rather a highly educative, philosophic reading, which indicates methods and transmits a passion efficaciously. At times, it seems to move the reader to an examination of conscience, on his cultural and technical knowledge and, more deeply, on the adequacy of his geriatric vocation. To become all of this, the textbook had to be written by a single author, supported by a close, homogeneous group of collaborators, grown in the “faith” of the same school. A characteristic quite anomalous – again – for medical textbooks nowadays.

Within this methodological framework, the description of the most important clinical conditions and syndromes affecting old and very old persons turns out to be exhaustive and often highly innovative, as witnessed by the chapters on frailty, dementia and geriatric rehabilitation. Further, the book extensively covers topics usually overlooked or ignored in textbooks, such as the limits of evidence-based medicine in the elderly, the impact of psychological and psycho-social factors on the clinical presentation of diseases in old age, and the current status of healthcare for the frail elderly in Italy. The vast and relevant chapter on the physiology of ageing in body organs and systems, where accurate distinction is made between changes associated with normal ageing and those due to diseases of senescence, deserves a special mention. Some of these topics are presented very extensively, so that the reader will find a deeper and more comprehensive description than in many international Geriatrics textbooks. The way the bibliography is organised is another one of Senin’s efforts that need to be mentioned: not a strict number of references, as in many textbooks, but a complete, detailed bibliography, permitting verifications, elaborations and comparisons. This approach is particularly valuable in Geriatrics, a discipline with global vision and scope, whose boundaries are frequently crossed over by other clinical specialists not adequately mastering its scientific foundations.

In spite of being written by a great expert, the book can be easily consulted because of its language, distant from the typical arid prose of classic medical science. The writing is, indeed, clear, passionate and touching, so that one can perceive the willingness to communicate clinical problems and ethical dilemmas from real day-by-day practice, conducted in close contact with patients. Sometimes a shudder of frustration can be felt. When, for example, the complex needs of the elderly are compared with the inadequacies of the Italian healthcare system. You can then almost feel that Senin believes he has strenuously fought a lost battle. Also the picture on the cover of the book, a painting by Giuseppe De Gregorio entitled Total Eclipse, seems to reinforce this impression. But this interpretation is most appropriately denied by the following words by Enrico Macaluso, a present-day Italian politician: “Lost battles are only those one lacks the courage to fight”.

G. Masotti