José Baselga 1959–2021

My mentor and friend José Baselga died on 21 March 2021 at the age of 61, surrounded by his family in La Cerdanya, north of Barcelona, Spain. José was widely considered one of the best cancer-drug developers in the world, in addition to being a compassionate and gifted clinician. In his career, José contributed to the development and approval of a dozen drugs, saving or improving the lives of countless patients with cancer.

José was born in Barcelona in 1959 and received his medical degree from Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona in 1983. He started his residency at Vall d'Hebron Hospital, but before completing it, moved to the United States to work at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. Despite his clinical duties, José also conducted laboratory work at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), testing the activity of new antibodies that target the growth-factor receptors EGFR and HER2—precursors of the now-approved targeted therapies cetuximab and trastuzumab. In 1991 he moved to MSKCC full time, to work under the mentorship of John Mendelsohn and Larry Norton, with whom he contributed to the development of cetuximab, the monoclonal antibody to EGFR that is currently approved for both head and neck cancer and colorectal cancer, and trastuzumab, the monoclonal antibody to HER2 that revolutionized the management of HER2-positive breast cancer.

In 1996, José made the bold decision to return to Spain and serve as Chief of Oncology of Vall d'Hebron Hospital in Barcelona, at the time an internationally little-known public hospital that lacked a strong oncology research track. Beyond his skills as a clinician scientist, a real gift José had was his vision. Looking far into the future, he worked strenuously to attract talent and hire the best biomedical professionals to create not only a powerhouse of oncology research but also a new school of biomedical thinking: science-based precision medicine. The legacy of this work, visible on the hills overlooking the hospital, is the Vall d'Hebron Institute of Oncology, now led by Josep Tabernero, José's closest collaborator at the time.

Never one to rest on his laurels, in 2010 José was ready once again for a career change. As the Chief of Oncology and Co-Director of the Cancer Center at Massachusetts General Hospital, he had the opportunity to build a competitive

Photo compliments of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

clinical investigation program in one of the best hospitals in the world, and he succeeded again. In January 2013, José returned to New York, having been appointed Physician-in-Chief of MSKCC and, at the same time, starting his laboratory in the institute's Human Oncology and Pathogenesis Program. Under his leadership, MSKCC founded the Center for Molecular Oncology, where the tumors of almost all patients walking into the clinic would be genomically characterized, and invested considerable resources into the Early Drug Development Service, a multidisciplinary group of oncologists and researchers with the common goal of testing innovative therapies in patients with cancer. In January 2019, José accepted another challenge—no one knew it would be his final one—by moving to the pharmaceutical industry to become Executive Vice-President for Research & Development Oncology at AstraZeneca, with the mandate to revolutionize the way clinical trials are designed and performed.

Every time José arrived at a new institution, it was like a storm: a few trees might fall along the way, but the blades of the windmills were constantly spinning. In the words of Sunil Verma, hired by José to

lead the breast cancer program shortly after he joined AstraZeneca: "He challenged the norm and made magic happen whether that was in people or organizations. His ability to lead, push, build and have the vision of the future is what differentiated him from others." I met José in September 2004, when he offered me a postdoc position in his laboratory in Barcelona. That was the beginning of a long professional relationship and friendship during which we laughed, shouted and argued, but most of all, shared mutual respect and rejoiced watching many mentees finding their ways into science. I witnessed the cultural change José was able to instill in others, especially during his time at MSKCC, when he was leading the clinical component of the institute and oversaw clinical and translational research. I, along with other colleagues, rode the same wave of enthusiasm for translational research. Back then, nothing seemed impossible. José's scientific thinking was always a few years ahead of his time. His way of celebrating a scientific success was by seeking the next one: the next difficult problem to tackle, the next drug to develop, or the next therapy combination to test—all driven by an unrelenting desire to do better for the patients.

José lived his mission intensely, and, as his mentee, I always recognized his need for others to share the way he felt about research, whether he was ecstatic about a clinical study or a discovery in the lab, or disappointed about a result. Through those shared feelings for both the successes and the disappointments, he motivated his mentees and collaborators and steeled their resolve to bring forward the next wave of innovative thinking and overcome the challenges they faced.

During a memorial for José where dozens of scientists, oncologists and friends gathered to remember his life, his friend and

past collaborator Levi Garraway compared José's career to La Sagrada Familia, the famous, and still unfinished, church in Barcelona designed by Antoni Gaudí: "Like the church, José's presence was towering, inspirational, and decidedly unique—yet unfinished. The 'finishing' must now be done by the people whom he inspired and galvanized."

José's untimely passing has created an unfillable void in the lives of his beloved family and his many friends. His visionary leadership and insatiable scientific curiosity have left an indelible impression on the researchers and clinicians who were

trained by him and worked alongside him. His immense contribution to oncology transformed the clinical practice and improved the lives of many patients. This will be his lasting legacy and will continue to guide the way new medicines are tested and approved to revolutionize cancer care for years to come. □

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