



ANA LYGIA PIRES MELARAGNO

BRAZIL

Ana Lygia Pires Melaragno graduated in 1984, determined to work in Oncology. She started in adult patients' care, in postoperative oncologic surgeries: the care was complex and the knowledge was small. There were no courses and the learning was on the job.

She then joined the Foundation Antônio Prudente, one of the largest cancer hospitals in Brazil, where she worked for about ten years. She learned how to provide care and soon got involved in the implementation of educational processes there.

Training the staff and attracting the interest of professionals to oncology was urgent. She organized courses and activities to train and integrate professionals that were interested. She contributed to the creation of the first school to train mid-level professionals in this specialty. Education became a mission because only knowledge guarantees patient safety.

In 1997, in Campinas, Ana Lygia Pires Melaragno worked at the Boldrini Children's Center, specialized in Oncology and Haematology, and entered Paediatric Oncology. Since then, she has dedicated herself to the SOBOPE Nursing Committee, organized courses and scientific events, and promoted training throughout Brazil. She worked on the integration of teaching and assistance, presenting Paediatric Oncology to students, including Paediatric Oncology as a specialty for Brazilian nurses.

"The patients didn't choose to be there, they didn't plan it, but we did. So we must care with competence and compassion. I have enough experience to say that nursing is a profession of excellence because it allows us to care for the other, always, even when the cure is not possible."

On Relationships that Influenced My Career

Many people influenced my career, helping me choose the field of Oncology and specifically, Paediatric Oncology. I watched a class on Oncology, still in undergraduate school, when a doctor was showing the head and neck surgeries and from that moment on I decided that I wanted to take care of those people and offer my best. The class, centered on the medical practice concerned with removing the tumour at any cost to the patient, showed me the importance of care and teamwork. This class also showed me that it was not enough for the renowned surgeon to master the content because to be an educator, one needs more than this, so I sought my training in pedagogy some years later.

Two people influenced me a lot. One was Nurse Odete Gazzi, Manager of Nursing at the Antônio Prudente Foundation, from whom I learned posture and respect for patients and their families, dedication to care even when cure was not possible. She motivated me to pursue teaching in this area because she identified in me the necessary competencies for this activity. The second person was my husband of 31 years, Dr. Renato Melaragno, who is a paediatric oncologist. Paediatric Oncology is about working as a team, sharing decisions, where the nurse plays a fundamental role due to our proximity with the family and the patient all the way through. Paediatric Oncology is a link between the teams who must be scientifically prepared and who should have the necessary skills for safe care for everyone—patient, family, and professionals. Nurses are the educators of the team of healthcare professionals, patients, and families because a lot of information and routine changes occur during treatment.

On Challenges and Overcoming Them

I believe that my biggest challenge was dealing with the lack of information and specific knowledge about cancer, its signs and symptoms, therapeutic modalities, and chances of cure, and understanding how this lack of knowledge impacts the survival curve. This lack of knowledge reinforced the myths of an incurable disease, associated with a view of a suffering death. This kept professionals away; there was difficulty in hiring because candidates were rare. I heard that I was a special nurse because I was working with these patients, but I wanted to be a specialist. Seeking knowledge and sharing was the strategy I used to attract and retain professionals. I developed specific training programmes for newcomers and gave job opportunities to new graduates, which allowed me to build solid teams in the institutions where I worked. Accessing undergraduate students was another strategy to sensitize future professionals and awaken their interest in Paediatric Oncology. Developing permanent education programmes in assistance and teaching institutions were also great challenges that I faced for 30 years. Teaching about the therapeutic modalities, developing skills and approaching the nurse's protagonism is a huge challenge.

Another great challenge is the training of nurses specialized in Paediatric Oncology, the creation of courses coordinated and taught by professionals with expertise in the area, as well as the active participation of nurses in medical associations such as the Brazilian Society of Paediatric Oncology (SOBOPE) and the Brazilian Association of Nursing. I am also dedicated to talking about signs and symptoms for nurses so that they can contribute to the identification of suspicious cases through the nursing consultation. I believe that if there is more information about this we can improve the cure rates in Brazil.

On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I think it is important to be aware that we are only one person with several important roles at the same time: the nurse, mother, wife, daughter, friend.....same person. Integrating all the roles is difficult and for this, we need the support of family and friends. But my husband was fundamental because he always encouraged me and took care of our son so that I could be at work, caring for my patients and their families.

So, family was fundamental, and besides this, working in institutions that recognized their role and responsibility in professional education and training allowed me to conduct training sessions in other states and institutions. There were many invitations. I could contribute to different realities, considering that Brazil is a big country and the needs are immense. I was able to get to know most of the Brazilian institutions, and this added knowledge that I applied to my work and to external training courses I led. The seriousness with which Brazil takes care of its children, offering quality treatment to all through the Unified Health System, makes our professional commitment worthwhile. To the Unified Health System, we are equal.

My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders

The advice I would give to a 25-year-old would be to manage your career, be a nurse with focus, choose the area you are going to dedicate yourself to, acquire specialized knowledge, and make a difference.

Nurses can be involved in management, assistance, teaching, and research, but it is important to have this awareness and focus on something that we want to improve or contribute. I see professionals with many different specialization courses but with no depth in any of them. We have to manage our career in a way that we can be proud of our profession, feel a sense of accomplishment and professional satisfaction. We must get involved with our professional associations and work for better nursing. Working in Paediatric Oncology requires professionals who take charge of their careers and are committed to the patients and their families.