

Transcript of Montserrat Interview Part 1: History of Hematology in Spain and iwCLL

Montserrat: So.

Marti: Well, you know, perhaps maybe, to start, which is somewhat what I did with Alberto [Orfao], is to get a feeling for the history of CLL in Spain. And I realize it's almost impossible to talk about the history of CLL without some interface between internal medicine, hematology, and CLL.

Montserrat: Absolutely.

Marti: So maybe start with the history of the Department of Hematology in Barcelona.

Montserrat: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I mean, it's—so, there is a study that starts to me. It starts in 1969. That was when I finished medicine at the University of Salamanca. There, my professor and one of my first mentors, that was professor Ciril Rozman, that he was based in Barcelona, and he said to me, "Well, you see, I will come back to Barcelona to have the chair there. Why you don't come with me?" So, in my personal history about CLL, for a long, long period of time, has been assimilating to that of Ciril Rozman.

I mean, at the very first, we started by internal medicine, because you are absolutely right. These were still the days in which the smart people were dedicated to internal medicine and the not so smart guys were those who were dedicating to a specialty. So, at these last four, five, six years, something like that, and then, at a given moment, it was Rozman's personal decision. He said, "Well, listen, I have started realizing that internal medicine is becoming a too big field, and that it would be much better for each one of us to dedicate to a different specialty. I am, myself." This is what he said. "I will dedicate to hematology, and I would be very glad if you would follow me in hematology."

And that's the main reason why I went to Paris. So, in those days, America was very, very far away, so I used to stay in Europe, either in the UK or where the hematology was extremely powerful, or in France, where was the dominant figure, the leader personality of Jean Bernard. And I stayed there for almost 2 years. And as I said to you before, I mean, I learned many, many things but equally in terms of organization, of a big department. I mean, working, of keeping focused on a given field. And I watched a particularly interesting reformer.

When I went back to Barcelona, that was 1976? '75? '75. I was really looking at how to incorporate myself into the department of

hematology. I mean, the department of hematology was already something going on. And there were people dedicated to acute leukemia, other people working on myeloma, other people...So I had to seek for a disease, and I thought from the very beginning that CLL was a very interesting disease for a variety of reasons. It's frequent. It's very easy to be started—I mean, you just need to draw blood. In those days, there were no good therapies for CLL, so that's an additional challenge. So, many, many of these things were around. And then one day, I opened my issue of *Blood*, and I came across to the Kanti Rai paper, 1975, with the classification.¹ And I took one of my friends and my associates those days, a resident of mine, as a matter of fact. And I said, "Well, you see, this is interesting because the plots were not survival plots, they were dots." [Draws diagram not shown on screen.] So, based on the life expectancy, something like that.

Marti: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Montserrat: Zero, and one, and two, and so. Let's try to reproduce this result in our studies. And we started—I mean, dossier by dossier, history by history. We collected the data and the classification was very nice to reproduce. Yeah? And then I got the paper published in the *Lancet*²—actually, there was a letter. But I was so proud that—

Marti: Sure.

Montserrat: That I was a young person.

Marti: To *Lancet*.

Montserrat: I mean, to get a letter in *Lancet*. And, the letter in *Lancet* was key, I mean, to much more things because immediately after, again that was probably '76, '77, I received a phone call from a very good fellow of mine, whose name is Guillaume Dighiero.

Marti: Mmhmm.

Montserrat: And I think that this is another person that should say a word about the history of CLL.

Marti: Absolutely.

Montserrat: Guillaume Dighiero was, in those days an associate and afterwards, as I did, he became independent. But he was a close associate of

¹ Rai KR, Sawitsky A, Cronkite EP, et al. Clinical staging of chronic lymphocytic leukemia. *Blood*. 1975 Aug;46(2):219-34.

² Hernández Nieto L, Montserrat-Costa E, et al. Bone marrow patterns and clinical staging in chronic lymphocytic leukaemia. *Lancet*. 1977;309(8024):1269.

Jacques-Louis Binet. And Guillaume Dighiero said to me, "Well, Emilio, listen. You know what, we are organizing a meeting of CLL people interested in CLL in Paris. Can you come?" And I said, "Of course. There is no—why not?" And that was what we called the first International Workshop on CLL.

Marti: And that was '77?

Montserrat: '77, '78. And I have the list. I will show you the list afterwards, in the computer because that was very amazing. There were Jacques-Louis Binet, of course, and Kanti Rai, I mean, which to me, are the key persons in the history, recent development of CLL. There was David Galton and Daniel Catovsky. Arthur Sawitsky.

Marti: Arthur, yeah.

Montserrat: Arthur Sawitsky. Gene Cronkite. Do you remember Gene Cronkite?

Marti: Of course, but I never met.

Montserrat: There was a cytogeneticist whose name was Tin Han.

Marti: Oh really, he was at the first meeting?

Montserrat: Yeah, he was there. And it's, uh...I wouldn't meet anyone else. But there was Kanti, Jacques-Louis, Guillaume Dighiero, and Galton, Danny Catovsky, and then Cronkite, Arthur Sawitsky, there was me... Ok, I think that was—³

Marti: May I be so bold as to ask whether the first meeting was in the hospital or in professor Binet's apartment?

Montserrat: It was in the hospital. It was in the hospital at Pitié Salpêtrière. And then we try it. The main reason to have this meeting was—I mean the willingness of Jacques-Louis Binet to gather all of us, I mean to put all of us together. But also, there was a kind of *científico*⁴ reason. And I must say, the *científico* reason, quotation marks, is that in those days, besides the Rai classification, Jacques-Louis Binet had published his own classification. So, there was more American versus—

Marti: Europe.

Montserrat: Europe or Euro versus. And we wanted to quantify the classifications. And we did. I mean, we did the kind of effort and we published a

³ Dr. Montserrat later recalled that Mogens Mørk Hansen was also present at the first iwCLL meeting.

⁴ Spanish translation: scientific

position paper in the *British Journal of Hematology*⁵ in which it was recommended to combine Rai and Binet stages and to say well, when you say that a patient has stage A disease, next you have to put in between brackets if a disease is stage 0 or stage 1 or stage 2. Well, that was a small community that was started and the atmosphere was very friendly. And I would like to emphasize, that I think that all this history, without the complicity between Jacques-Louis Binet and Kanti Rai, would have never been possible. I think that there is a matter of friendship.

Marti: Yes.

Montserrat: Because the history of CLL, if you asked me, "Emilio, what is the meat, I mean, what is the core of the history, modern history of CLL," I would say to you, "There's a long, nice, long-lasting, very nice, and generous history of friendship." That's the very beginning, yeah?

Then we start having meetings and the meetings were attended by 30 people, 40 people. I got a meeting in Barcelona. I will show you the photography. We were something like 60 people. That was a big, big, success. 60 people interested in CLL. Last meeting we had in Barcelona, a couple of years ago, were close to 3000 people, if I remember well. So that was fantastic.

And then we have to keep talking about what happened in Spain. There were many, many people in Spain that became interested in CLL. One of the very first ones, she was my student, as a matter of fact, is Estella Matutes.

Marti: Oh.

Montserrat: Estella Matutes, she's not from Barcelona, she's from the Balearic Islands but she was a student in our department. She became interested in CLL and then she moved to Daniel Catovsky.

Marti: Sure.

Montserrat: And afterwards, I think that in our own department and there were people that immediately got interested in the disease and so also in Salamanca. I would not like to mention, I mean, too many specific names, because of the risk of missing somebody.

Marti: Sure, sure.

Montserrat: Also, I am very proud of it because since we had some credit there were some people from Rome coming to work on CLL, and a guy from

⁵ Binet JL, Catovsky D, Chandra P, et al. Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia: Proposals for a revised prognostic staging system. *Br J Haematol*. 1981 Jul;48(3):365-367.

the south of Italy which is a very good friend of mine whose name is Stefano Molica. And you know Molica for sure.

Marti: I do.

Montserrat: Because of his papers, I mean—he has spent something like two years in our department and he became a CLL aficionado. But that's more or less—I mean the—how it happened.

Now it's a big department. Now there is so many people interested in CLL, writing down projects. The people from Salamanca, they are very good, as you know.

Marti: The first meeting in Barcelona was in a little suburb?

Montserrat: I think that this—

Marti: —In a town called—oh, it's in—

Montserrat: I think that this is the summary—

Marti: Sitges, or something.

Montserrat: 1991, that's, those are the proceedings of the 1991 that...I mean, it was interesting because if you look at the list of the people that attended that meeting...so it's recent names. I mean, as you can see here, Juliusson was here. You can see Tom Kipps. You can see Guillaume Dighiero, you can see Binet here, Han that was—

Marti: Tin Han.

Montserrat: Robin Foa.

Marti: Yes.

Montserrat: —that was already listed, and Anna [Guarini]. So, there were the first four cooperative groups, well, the cooperative groups had been very important. There was one in France, and there was another one in Spain. I was reading the Spanish cooperative group called PETHEMA. The German one was the very last one in a way, so there were basically the French and the UK—that was Daniel Catovsky, of course, and the Spanish.

It'd be interesting to go through the list of these people here. So, you can see here Eva Kimby and Mellstedt the famous immunologist, Geisler. So, many of them, they are still active. Cheson.

Marti: Yes.

Montserrat: So, Michallet and Saven, I mean, that was hairy cell [unintelligible]. Michael Keating—

Marti: Yes.

Montserrat —was there.