

OBITUARY

Professor Gilles Mentha (1952–2014)

On Sunday, May 25, Gilles Mentha was riding his bicycle, preparing for sports activities with some of his liver transplant patients. While his mind wished to challenge his physical condition once again, his heart refused to do so. Gilles died unexpectedly of acute heart failure.

The sudden death of Gilles Mentha shocked all those who knew him: with his intelligence, generosity, and gentle elegance, he seemed to be invulnerable. His passing away is without any doubt a great loss to the surgical and liver transplant community. Personally, I lost my best friend as well as my 'intellectual brother'.

After exemplary middle school studies, Gilles started his surgical training in 1984 at the University Hospital of Geneva under the lead of Professor Adrien Rohner, a mentor for whom he had huge respect, and always – to the present day – worked as a team with his friend Professor Philippe Morel. Gilles graduated as surgeon in Switzerland in 1990.

He became an Associate Professor of Surgery in October 1985. In 1993, he presented his PhD thesis on one of his favorite research topics: complications in liver transplantation. In December 2003, he became the head of the Department of Transplantation of the University Hospital in Geneva, and in 2007, he was promoted to ordinary professor of surgery at the Faculty of Medicine in Geneva.

During his surgical training (1978–1984) and career, Gilles developed a particular interest in the fields of hepatobiliary and liver transplantation surgery. This prompted him to do a fellowship at the Department of hepatobiliary surgery of the Hôpital Paul Brousse in Villejuif, under the lead of Professor Henri Bismuth (May 1984–September 1985). He then made several visits to different transplant centers such as the Thomas Starzl Transplant Center in Pittsburgh.

His remarkable clinical and scientific activities resulted in many seminal contributions in the field of liver surgery and liver transplantation. He set up, together with his collaborators, excellence in the liver transplant center of Geneva, obtaining results that are amongst the best worldwide.

He also developed a special interest in the treatment of hepatocellular cancer and of 'nonresectable colorectal liver metastases'. His broad clinical practice and his sharp critical analysis of the scientific literature allowed his team to become a reference for oncological liver and transplantation surgery.



Gilles Mentha (right) and Jan Lerut at the meeting of the International Hepatobiliarypancreatic Association in Seoul at the end of March 2014.

Under his leadership, the Geneva group developed a major interest in the treatment of liver cancer in cirrhotic patients. Several members of his team such as Pietro Majno, Laura Rubbia-Brandt, and Christian Toso stimulated the liver transplant community to reflect on how to use (in the most appropriate and effective way) the scarce resource of liver allografts for the expanding group of potential liver recipients presenting with hepatocellular cancer.

Gilles Mentha was the first in the world to develop the superb idea of the 'reversed or liver first' approach in the treatment of colorectal liver metastases. Patients presenting with synchronous extensive bi-lobe colorectal metastases underwent, after state-of-the-art chemotherapy, liver resection followed by the treatment of the primary tumor. This method offered a chance of cure to many patients who would have developed nonoperable liver metastases if the primary colorectal tumor had been treated first. Therefore, Gilles has to be recognized as a worldwide leader in the treatment of liver secondaries. Through his many appearances at national and international meetings, the surgical, oncological, and transplantation communities became interested in these approaches.

The main concern of Gilles Mentha has always been to push his team forward and to explore new horizons in the field of liver surgery and transplantation. This can also be seen in the choice of his favorite quote by the

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French philosopher Albert Jacquard, who said, 'Il faut remplacer l'exploit solitaire par la réussite solidaire' ('It is necessary to turn the solitary exploit into a solidary success').

Prof. Mentha was actively involved in the European Liver and Intestine Transplant Association as well as in the European Liver Transplant Registry Expert Panel for many years. Moreover, he (co-)organized several meetings and symposiums in the field of liver transplantation and surgery. His international recognition was recently enhanced by his election as the chair of the upcoming meeting of the International Hepato-Biliary Association, to be held in Zurich in 2018.

The sudden death of Gilles Mentha will undoubtedly leave a void within the surgical and transplantation 'liver community' and will deeply touch all those who had the privilege of knowing him. Everyone who worked with him will remember the unlimited dedication to his patients, his integrity and passion, his analytical spirit and meticulous surgical skills, and most of all his charisma when treating patients and inspiring his young collaborators. May his life be a valuable example to the upcoming generations of surgeons and physicians.

Jan Lerut
Professor, Past-president ESOT