



Remembering Dr. Ralph L. Sacco

The University of Miami Miller School of Medicine mourns the passing of Ralph L. Sacco, M.D., M.S., professor and chair of the Department of Neurology and a highly respected and beloved member of the UHealth and Miller School community, on January 17, from a glioblastoma.



Ralph L. Sacco, M.D., M.S.

Dr. Sacco was a dedicated, nationally and internationally renowned stroke neurologist whose leadership helped establish the Miller School's reputation as a hub of excellence in research, education, and treatment of stroke and cardiovascular and brain health.

Besides being chair of the Department of Neurology, he held the positions of the Olemberg Family Chair in Neurological



Disorders; professor of neurology, public health sciences, human genetics, and neurosurgery; chief of neurology at Jackson Memorial Hospital; and executive director of the Evelyn F. McKnight Brain Institute, which focuses on advancing clinical care and research in age-related memory loss and cognitive decline. He was also director and multi-principal investigator of the Miami Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI) and senior associate dean for clinical and translational science.

Advanced the Understanding of Stroke

Dr. Sacco's outstanding achievements and contributions in research, teaching and mentorship, and patient care made a lasting impact on health care in South Florida, the nation, and the world. His work was integral to advancements in overall brain health, stroke, and cardiovascular disease prevention and treatment, and helped to advance health equity, create more targeted stroke prevention programs, improve outcomes, and enhance quality of life for stroke patients. Dr. Sacco's collaborative research advanced the understanding of stroke and cardiovascular and brain health, and helped elucidate the impact of modifiable behaviors, such as alcohol consumption and physical activity, on stroke risk.

"Ralph Sacco personified the excellence and preeminence to which our academic health system aspires," said University of Miami President Julio Frenk. "He was truly one of the most distinguished members of our faculty, whose professional achievements, scientific originality, and personal virtues of leadership changed our University – and the field of neuroscience – for the better. We share in the grief of his loved ones and feel this loss acutely."



Dr. Sacco at his induction into the National Academy of Medicine

A Remarkable Career

Dr. Sacco's career was marked by some of the highest accolades and awards in the medical field, including first-ever leadership roles that demonstrated his vast influence. He was an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine. He served as president of the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) from 2017 to 2019, and was the first neurologist to serve as president of the American Heart Association (AHA), from 2010 to 2011. He was the only physician to have served as president of both the AHA and the AAN.

Dr. Sacco was a fellow of the Stroke and Epidemiology Councils of the AHA, the AAN, and the American Neurological Association, and was a member and sat on the board of



directors of the World Stroke Organization (WSO). He published more than 1,000 peer-reviewed articles, served on the editorial boards of several neurological and cardiovascular journals, and was editor-in-chief of the AHA's peer-reviewed scientific journal *Stroke*.

"Dr. Ralph Sacco's work helped to cement the Miller School's reputation and enhance Miami's world-class standing in stroke and cardiovascular and brain health," said Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School. "He was a gifted researcher, a committed teacher and mentor, and an irreplaceable friend who was part of the nucleus of our institution. He will be sorely missed."

A New Jersey native, Dr. Sacco attended Boston University School of Medicine, where he assisted his mentor, Philip A. Wolf, M.D., FAAN, in collecting and interpreting data for the Framingham Heart Study, now the nation's longest running longitudinal study of risk for cardiovascular disease.

Following his residency at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, Dr. Sacco joined the faculty at Columbia University, where he founded the Northern Manhattan Stroke Study – a seminal population-based study of underserved and understudied Black and Latino populations – which produced significant findings that catalyzed the field.

Dr. Sacco was the founder and executive director of the Florida Stroke Registry and founding principal investigator of the Florida-Puerto Rico Collaboration to Reduce Stroke Disparities and the Family Study of Stroke Risk and Carotid Atherosclerosis. He was also co-investigator of many other NIH grants, and his success as a leading NIH-funded principal



investigator, with \$4.7 million in 2021, was key to the Miller School's ability to recruit and retain talent and advance scientific discovery in the field.

At the Miami CTSI, Dr. Sacco helped advance excellence in culturalized clinical and translational research. His commitment to a clinical translational research agenda furthered the CTSI's mission through the recruitment of academic faculty and support of research infrastructure for training the next generation of translational scientists.

"During his time here, Ralph Sacco made a range of substantial contributions in many spheres, advancing progress against some of the most complex diseases faced by our patients," said Dipen J. Parekh, M.D., chief operating officer, UHealth – University of Miami Health System, founding director of the Desai Sethi Urology Institute, executive dean for clinical affairs, and Victor A. Politano Endowed Chair in Urology. "His impact and influence cannot be overstated."

Accolades and Influence

Over the course of his career, Dr. Sacco garnered numerous awards and distinctions, notably the WSO's Global Leadership Award and the AHA's Gold Heart Award, Distinguished National Leadership Award, and 2022 Distinguished Scientist Award. At its chair summit in December 2022, the AAN announced the event's renaming as the Ralph L. Sacco Neurology Chair Summit.

"Ralph was a great friend, and although his life was cut short, he had a tremendous impact on those that knew him, the Department of Neurology, the University of Miami, and the global neurological community," said Jose Romano, M.D., professor of neurology, executive vice chair for clinical



affairs, chief of the Stroke Division, and director of the Vascular Neurology Fellowship Program.

Tatjana Rundek, M.D., Ph.D., professor of neurology, Evelyn F. McKnight Chair for Learning and Memory in Aging, and scientific director of the Evelyn F. McKnight Brain Institute, said that she was fortunate to have worked with Dr. Sacco at Columbia University and the Miller School for over 25 years, and described him as a mentor.

“Ralph was a legendary leader, a wonderful colleague, and a dear friend,” Dr. Rundek said. “He taught me so much and beyond neurology and science. Ralph had a vision for improving brain health. The institute is founded on that vision, and together, we will continue advancing it and moving forward with discoveries and treatments.

“We will miss him very much, but he always will be with us and watching over us from the other side, as he told me few weeks back. Knowing that gives me great comfort,” Dr. Rundek said.

Dr. Sacco will be remembered for his brilliance, the height and breadth of his accomplishments, and the warmth, kindness, and compassion that distinguished his person and his career. His death is a tremendous loss to UHealth and the Miller School, where he leaves an indelible mark and an enduring legacy, particularly as a mentor of many members of the next generation of researchers.

Memorial services are being arranged and will be announced at a later date. Dr. Sacco is survived by his husband, Scott Dutcher; his father; and his four siblings.

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