



# YOUNG

## Interview with Alessandro Cortese, ESTRO chief executive officer

### **What is your name and where are you from?**

My name is Alessandro Cortese and I am from Milan, Italy, but I have lived in Brussels for 20 years. For the last 15 years, I've been at ESTRO.

### **Did you start as CEO or did you have another role before that?**

I was hired as CEO in August 2009.

### **How did you end up working at ESTRO?**

It's a long story... but I have a background in management. I studied political sciences and I have a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. I have worked in management strategy consultancy. But at some point, I wanted to do something more meaningful, not just for shareholders of companies. I went to work for an agency of the UNESCO, where I worked on the preservation of non-material oral patrimony (things like songs, cultural heritage, etc.) for a few years. Then I became the director of a foundation in this field. This was a step in the direction of non-governmental organisations and, after I moved to Belgium and initially worked for a company that provided services and consulting for membership-based associations, it seemed right to move to a single organisation and I felt it was time to find a playground where I could explore my own ideas freely.

I wanted to work in healthcare; that was clear to me, for personal reasons. ESTRO came by coincidence really... I was contacted by Michel Ballieu, the then CEO of the European Cancer Organisation. ESTRO was looking for a CEO and I joined several candidates. After a long selection process, I was selected.

### **Were there other CEOs before you or was there also a change in structure?**

I am the fourth CEO of ESTRO, if I'm correct.

### **What were the main challenges you faced when you joined the Society?**

ESTRO was not in very good shape financially. It was also growing so there was a need to bring structure and to professionalise the Society. We wanted to create service and benefits for the members.

### **COVID was also a financial challenge in more recent years... Would you say the roughest part is behind us?**

Yes; of course, COVID was a financial challenge, but we went through it well and I would say it is behind us now. The Community is eager to forget about it and want to be active. We had to transition to virtual meetings for a while but now we are transitioning back to on-site, with a broader perspective as we move to a blended offering of services and activities.

In the transition after COVID, we implemented a new governance strategy to prepare for a new phase. Now it is in place and we are looking at new challenges related to the workforce and access to care. This is part of a shift from looking inwards, into ESTRO, to looking outwards, to how we can contribute to society at large.

### **Would you say that you have led this shift?**

It would be arrogant to say it was me who made this change, but certainly, when you are in a position for a long time, you have the opportunity to focus on long-term goals. There were already ongoing projects such as the Health Economics in Radiation Oncology (HERO), which were moving in this direction. I see

myself more as a broker of ideas: being there to help structure the ideas in terms of the Society. The governance of ESTRO involves a great diversity of people, who are in different positions and have different ideas; I bring a certain continuity with my 15 years at ESTRO. You can make an analogy with politics: the government is elected and there are frequent changes. At the ESTRO office, we are more like civil servants.

### **What are your duties at ESTRO?**

My duty is to implement the strategy defined by the board, make the link between the business and the governance side of things, and to translate it into business plans and models. Essentially, I focus on the business component, the efficiency and the structure, so that the Society can meet its mission in a sustainable manner.

### **Do you interact with ESTRO members?**

I interact mainly with the Board and the senior leadership group, which comprises the three presidents, the three council chairs and the Deputy CEO, Chiara Gasparotto. But I aim to be available to all ESTRO members! All councils and committees have other contact persons from the ESTRO staff and I am in contact with my team, so overall I have a good overview of what is being done in all the ESTRO bodies.

### **Of course, a very important pillar of the Society is the annual congress: where do you spend your time at the congress?**

Well, a bit everywhere. The most relevant scientific sessions for me are the health economics ones. But I do not have the time to attend too many sessions. I spend a lot of time in meeting rooms: the congress is where everyone is, so I have meetings with different organisations: the national societies and other societies to establish or renew Memoranda of Understanding, for instance, and with partners to make sure that ESTRO's structure is understood by all stakeholders. I also spend some time with the companies to ensure that we have sponsorship for later years. We start preparing a year in advance!

I can give you a sneak preview into Glasgow already: we had the highest number of registrations by the early registration deadline and the highest number of abstracts submitted, so we are expecting a lot of attendees at ESTRO 2024.

### **Outside the congress, the way of working has changed quite a lot since COVID with ESTRO staff having a lot of flexibility in working onsite or from home: will you keep this format now?**

COVID has really thrown into question how we worked before. We wanted to make changes that would last. Now we have a very flexible system in which colleagues have not only the freedom to work from home or at the office, but also to design their lives how they want. This has been paying off with better staff retention and higher satisfaction! If you trust people, they give it back.

### **This sounds great for an office but is any of this applicable to a hospital environment?**

At ESTRO we deal with projects, not directly with patients, so of course it is different. But we work with volunteers from the committees who are active in the Society alongside their main jobs in hospitals. We also have to make ourselves available when the volunteers have time. My philosophy is that we are all grown-ups who can take responsibility for ourselves. In healthcare, there are some constraints but there are also many more tools now, so we can offer more flexibility.

Daily operations (at hospitals, for example) are essential but they are more related to achieving short-term goals. At ESTRO we want to focus on the long-term as an investment in the future. It is a trade-off, or rather a balance, between these two aspects that we need to achieve. At the management level, there needs to be some recognition of the time that people invest in long-term goals, without compromising on personal time.

### **Do you have a final message for (young) ESTRO members?**

It is an exciting time to become involved in ESTRO with focus groups, the online platform, and also the mentoring programmes for the younger members. There are many ways to include professionals of the



area and ESTRO is welcoming; it is a nice group that will give you a chance to grow and develop your career. Really, this is a good time to become involved. Some people may think that ESTRO is more closed than it really is. But all positions are filled through open calls and transparently. Communication between the ESTRO governance and the members is important but it does not have to go only through heads of departments. Leadership is not only linked with authority and titles. There are many other ways to lead: through ideas, through a vision, and through actions.



**Alessandro Cortese**

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