

VareseNews

A citizen of Varese at the Quirinale: he is one of the 5 best researchers

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Being convened at the Quirinale, near the cuirassiers and in an atmosphere of great official character, is something that does not happen every day. If then, to the emotion for the event, you add the discovery of being among the 5 best young researchers in the research into neurodegenerative diseases, the shock risks to paralyse you. This is what happened to Gabriele Baj, an authentic citizen of Varese, who has been involved in the neuronal research at the University of Trieste for years. (in the pictures he is the second from right). We met him some years ago, when he had appeared on the cover of the magazine Telethon thanks to the study he was carrying out on the Syndrome of Rett, a degenerative disease which affects the baby girls when they are about 18 months old.

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Last week, he was in the grand ball room in the Quirinale for receiving directly from President Giorgio Napolitano the prize and the research cheque of \$10000. “It has been a really incredible experience,” explains Gabriele Baj, “we were more than 50 young researchers and we had no idea of who the winners were. Hearing my name called has been fantastic. It has been a big recognition for what I do every day in the research laboratory on neurodegenerative diseases managed by professor Enrico Tongiorgi.” This is a fair recognition to the passion and the determination of this researcher who took his doctorate in 2007 and since then has lived thanks to the cheques which are renewed year after year, without any certainty for the future. “Without any doubt, what keeps me going on are both my passion and the fact of seeing the results of our work. In Rome, I was present at the lecture of professor Luigi Naldini who demonstrated how his researches had really changed the life perspectives of many children that, some time ago, would not have survived more than 5 or 6 years. These are the satisfactions which induce you to stand the precariousness of live.” In these last years, Gabriele Baj went also abroad, always thanks to funds and won cheques: “ I’ve experienced on my skin that, in the world, the ‘dream lab’, an ideal place for working, doesn’t exist. In every country there are problems and battle to face. Probably, in Italy we have too much bureaucracy and lower attention to young people.” At the Quirinale, the researcher of Varese received the International Prize “Bioeconomy Rome” 2014, which is reserved to young researchers who have carried out innovative researches on neurodegenerative diseases and who have obtained scientific results with a potential socio-economic impact.

Gabriele Baj competed for the **innovative explorations about the use of the Neurotropic Factor from the Brain** (acronym BDNF), as a therapy for the Rest Syndrome. Among the factors of merit considered by the international panel of judges, which included **the winner of a Nobel Prize Tim Hunt**, there was also the presence of patents in the résumé of the candidates. During the ceremony, the Ministry of Education, University and Research, Stefania Giannini, the President of IRBM Science Park, Pietro di Lorenzo, and the president of the Consortium “Collezione Nazionale di Composti Chimici e Centro Screening”, Enrico Garaci, stepped in.

“The field of survey is the one of neural atrophy,” he explained. “We are talking about a change of the cells, which become smaller, work less and have fewer relations with other cells. But **they are not dead cells, we have the hope that, finding the right medicines, they can return to be the previous ones**, with the same capability and interactivity. When we will find the answer, we will have solved most of the deteriorations that go from the syndromes of different nature, to schizophrenia, depression and stress. **The bad news is that the degenerations are a lot; the good news is that they are reversible.**” And with this precise objective, Gabriele goes on studying and experimenting in his laboratory in Trieste: “This is a really unique city in Italy. It’s small but with a lot of activity in the field of research. The relation among citizens and university student is very strong. Moreover, it’s a city open to the central Europe, where you can breathe a ‘mitteleuropean’ air.”

The award, received at the Quirinale was a real shot in the arm: “Our evaluation is based on the obtained results. This way, you get the loans for what you can produce and show. These are decisive dowels to build a career and reach that tranquillity, which will make you a centre of aggregation for new brains. I see my future in Italy or abroad: I am the result of the Italian public school. My country invested on me in high quality training. But the problem is not if I’ll go away: the problem is that no stranger has to arrive and substitute me to increase the cultural opening.”

When he heard his name, **in the background of the “Salone delle Feste” at the Quirinal, Gabriele Baj thought about his family:** “I dedicate my award to them. Because the tranquillity of having a family that supports me, lets me follow my dreams. And then, in my veins flows the blood of an ex Carabiniere: **my grandfather, who I’ve never met. He may have been right next to me while I was passing near the Carabinieri of the President’s Guard.** The emotion was huge.”

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