

## Editor's Page

# Greek Cardiology: Status Quo, Quo Vadis?

PANOS E. VARDAS

*Department of Cardiology, Heraklion University Hospital, Crete, Greece*



**D**uring the last twenty years, Greek cardiology, defined as the total of manpower, structures, functionalities and activities related to cardiology, has made undeniable progress. This positive development is easy to understand. It is due firstly to the fixed structures erected by an earlier generation of cardiologists. During the period 1960-1980 experienced clinical cardiologists, mainly in the Athens area, took initiatives backed by a high level of education and a powerful interest in science. This was at a time when Greece still had a high incidence of rheumatic fever and valvular disease. During the same period the first significant attempts were made to develop cardiac surgery.

At the end of the 1970s, with an improvement in the standard of living and changes in living conditions, the type of heart disease also followed a path of change. Coronary artery disease progressively became the main cause of morbidity and mortality.

European and American cardiology responded to a reciprocal feedback with swelling needs. At the same time, the available financial resources and funding by industry reinforced the rapid development of new diagnostic and therapeutic techniques. This explosion, mainly in invasive procedures and in cardiac surgery, took Greek cardiology by surprise. The first part of the 1980s saw a significant exodus of patients abroad, mainly to Great Britain.

Over time, however, a large number of capable cardiologists who had completed postgraduate studies in Europe or the north American continent brought about a big change. Today, Greek cardiology and cardiac surgery are self-sufficient and of high quality. As a result of this new reality the Greek cardiac patient's confidence in his doctor has been restored and very few patients now seek treatment abroad.

Apart from good clinical practice, however, Greek cardiology has also succeeded in developing research and training to an impressive level. An indication of this development is the number of Greek publications in prestigious international cardiology journals, our participation in international meetings

and invitations to Greek cardiologists to contribute to special high-level scientific forums. At the same time, Greek hospitals, public and private, are investing a lot of money in renewing their equipment and introducing new techniques. All these factors show that Greek cardiology is flourishing.

However, it would be remiss of me, or even naïve, not to examine this blossoming in more detail and from a broader perspective, to consider not only the achievements but also the weaknesses and the dangers that may threaten. In my view, one with which experienced colleagues tend to concur, the current problems in Greece that pose a certain threat to future developments may be summarised as follows.

First, there is the lack of an overall strategy at a national level for dealing with cardiovascular diseases. Research and the application of new clinical methods are developed at the whim of the cardiologists, with only limited supervision by the state.

Another important weakness is the progressive ageing of the medical personnel in the leading public hospitals, with no organised programme for timely replacement.

Finally, one of the time bombs ticking under future development in this country is poor financial management, mainly in public hospitals and sometimes on the part of insurance providers.

Focusing on the latter problem, one can easily see that it is uncontrolled expenditure and waste that, paradoxically, have promoted and subsidised development. Such a model of growth, however, inevitably has a limited time span. We need, therefore, more rational management of available financial resources; we need a strategy for the development of viable structures; and we need renewal and meritocracy in the selection of human resources, if our cardiology is to enjoy a long springtime.

It is up to the state to realise these needs, but to date it has been rare for the authorities to show evidence of inspiration, planning, awareness of international reality or, most importantly, a willingness to recruit those who are worthy.