

Disgraced celebrity surgeon's spoiled dreams of fame

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Dreams of fame and fortune turned into a nightmare for a once-renowned Italian surgeon who compared himself to Doctor Frankenstein and now stands accused of using patients as guinea pigs.

Sweden's Karolinska Institute (KI), which awards the Nobel Prize for Medicine, fired Paolo Macchiarini this week after years of controversy.

A pioneer in regenerative medicine, Paolo Macchiarini was born in Switzerland in 1958 and won international renown in 2008 after undertaking a grafted windpipe transplant using [stem cells](#).

In medical circles, his star was rising, and he was invited to Stockholm's KI as a visiting professor in 2010. He attained world fame for completing the first synthetic trachea transplant using stem cells in 2011.

Macchiarini used an ingenious artificial windpipe made of plastic and seeded it with the patient's own stem cells, which are immature cells that grow into specialised cells that ultimately make up each of the body's organs.

His work was initially hailed as a game-changer for transplant medicine, with the surgeon performing three such operations in Stockholm and five others around the world.

"We want to create new organs, like Frankenstein," he said in a documentary broadcast on Swedish public television in January 2016.

But by that time, his star was fading fast.

His troubles began back in 2014 after several surgeons at KI filed a complaint alleging that Macchiarini had downplayed the risks of the procedure.

Six of his eight patients reportedly died, and allegations ensued that the risky procedure had been carried out on at least one individual who had not, at the time, been critically ill.

Karolinska suspended all synthetic trachea transplants shortly after.

Macchiarini also carried out clinical work in Krasnodar, Russia where patients undergo surgery for research purposes.

But his time there was overshadowed by an internal investigation at KI, as well as the growing number of news stories in the Italian and Swedish media about the doctor's troubled past.

Prosecutors in Florence, Italy have begun a preliminary investigation into Macchiarini after patients accused him of violating the Hippocratic Oath by charging excessive sums of money, sometimes as much as 150,000 euros (\$170,000).

Swedish police are investigating Macchiarini on suspicion of gross negligent manslaughter and bodily harm, which could entail up to six years in prison.

'Ethical Chernobyl'

On Wednesday, the Karolinska Institute decided to dismiss him, permanently cutting ties with the surgeon.

"His actions have had tragic consequences for the individuals concerned and their families," said Mats Engelbrektson, the institute's director of human resources.

"His behaviour has damaged the credibility of KI and research in general."

An article in the Swedish medical journal, *Lakartidningen*, described the Macchiarini case as an "ethical Chernobyl" for the institute.

KI's vice-chancellor Anders Hamsten, and the general secretary of the Nobel Assembly Urban Lendahl, both resigned in February. The Karolinska Institute's board has largely been replaced in the wake of the controversy.

Macchiarini's dismissal was greeted with relief by the scientific community.

"I think we're in a very bad period now in Sweden, with this case of fraudulent behaviour, it makes people lose their motivation, especially young people, and it makes people question our integrity," said Lena Claesson-Welsh, a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences.

The doctor is accused of lying about his research by claiming that he conducted tests on animals before attempting similar transplants on human beings. He also faces allegations that he lied about his scientific research and his past experience with prestigious medical research centres.

"Paolo Macchiarini supplied false or misleading information in the CV he submitted to KI," the institute said, adding that he "demonstrated scientific negligence" in his research.

Vanity Fair magazine published an article in February chronicling how Macchiarini and his former fiancée Benita Alexander, a producer for US television network NBC, became engaged.

During their courtship, the doctor reportedly told her he had operated on Bill and Hillary Clinton, Emperor Akihito of Japan and US President Barack Obama. He apparently also promised her that Pope Francis would officiate at their wedding.

Macchiarini's lawyer, Bjorn Hurtig, declined comment for this story.

Earlier, in an interview with state broadcaster Swedish Radio, he said: "His intention was positive, he only wanted to help people, now he's been scandalised and portrayed negatively throughout the world."

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