TIME IN OUR ICU
Why do Intensivists always work in “top gear”?

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1. INTRODUCTION
This original gnoseological research was developed after observing that clinical time in ICU is perceived differently than in departments which do not deal with emergencies or intensivity. Our aim was to identify which factors influence our concept of Time in its formation and classification.
In 1997 we invited a psychiatrist to study our behaviour. After following us at work for several months he asked “Can you slow down, have a break or stop your activity?” We answered in unison: “No, we can’t!”. There was a moment while we thought: “Indeed we can’t. Why aren’t we able to slow down even when we do get a chance?” We wanted to improve our wellbeing by discovering how the concept of Time originates and develops in the Intensivist’s mind in ICU and how culture, profession, habitat and knowledge influence the way we feel about it.

2. METHODOLOGY
A specialized psychiatrist led a group of experts from various fields: intensivists, psychiatrists, mathematicians, sociologists. Meetings with intensivists who had over ten years experience in ICU led to both free and guided discussions. This was followed by data-processing and interpretation. We worked with mathematicians looking for similarities or connections with other scientific fields. Our aim was not to reduce the complexity of our findings into figures and statistics, but to find other ways of understanding and interpreting the findings about how we behave and why. An example was in the first question: “Why can’t we slow down? What is useful and what is harmful about our speed?”

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for an “internal” time. This behaviour is very common, depending not only on cultural and professional factors (Intensivists are used to emergencies) but also on cognitive, emotional and environmental elements. It depends on the close contact with critically ill who are totally dependent, thus creating a constant state of alert where tension rises when the Intensivist also has to deal with patient’s relatives who are afraid and aggressive. The accumulation of tension and feelings store up internal energy and we work in top gear, even when we needn’t, in order to protect ourselves from pain – the more we do the less we think. Time is dominated by acting faster and faster when facing the acute event, choices and decisions which cannot be delayed. Later comes reflection and processing of experiences. Then, by remembering what happened ,we develop “internal” time which is part of our own story.

Our professional life is a time-line where events of various lengths are laid. These events may take a few hours or a few minutes. Think of a traumatized youth who dies in our department a couple of hours after admission. The action time was short, a couple of hours, but it leaves feelings and effects which can go on for days, months or forever. This means events interact with us, with what we are and with how our experience of life and work have affected us. It also means that an episode effects different people in different ways. The Italian writer Italo Calvino said that even trivial events can become “decisive messages” according to the meaning we give to events and for how they make us feel. This is different for each one of us. Events and actions fill our personal time-line. The “fast time” is agitated and full of action: monitoring, observation, operating theatre…..facing relatives and their meeting with sudden death. Then comes the “slow time”, seemingly empty, soundless, silent, everything is over. Doctors close up medical records and nurses recompose the body. As we go through our routine, our minds go back over what happened, we develop “internal” time which is part of our experience just ended.

How many times have we spent nights fighting a battle against death with a patient who “wants to die”? When the action is over, we want only to rest, but we can’t and we keep on talking about it among ourselves for days on end. At home we can’t get off to sleep and if we do, we see “the film” again and again in our dreams because it might have ended when we didn’t want it. We need breaks in order to slow down and find time to metabolize our emotions by discussing and listening to others who share the situation. A team spirit gives us the strength to deal with guilt complexes and stressful situations which are all part of our work. “Emotion is to the mind as oxygen is to the body. So we consider lack of emotional contact equivalent to anaerobic work”.

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