2017 Schofield Memorial Lecture

Fasten your seat belts: A veterinarian’s life is not necessarily what you had planned for

Featuring: Dr. Ilaria Capua, DVM, PhD

Ilaria Capua is the Director of the One Health Center of Excellence at the University of Florida. Veterinarian by training and virologist by passion, she has also been a Member of the Italian Parliament for over three years.

In her career as a virologist she has dedicated most of her professional life to viral infections of animals that can be transmitted to humans, and that cause poverty and food security issues such as Avian influenza (bird flu) and Newcastle disease. At the peak of the H5N1 bird flu panzootic, she provided global leadership by igniting an international debate on the trans-disciplinary sharing of influenza virus genetic sequences to improve pandemic preparedness. This effort was covered by the international press and eventually led to a paradigm shift in the approach to pandemic preparedness, and is now considered an essential component of the fight against Ebola, Zika, and other infectious disease threats.

She has authored over 200 publications in peer reviewed journals and has published scientific books on Avian Influenza and Newcastle disease and books on careers in science for the general public. She is active in the field of science communication and in promoting female leadership in the scientific arena.

In 2007 Ilaria Capua was among the awardees of the Scientific American 50 Award for leadership in science policy, and in 2008 she was included among Seed’s Revolutionary Minds series, for her leadership in promoting sharing of information at an international level. Other international awards include the most prestigious award in veterinary medicine, the Penn Vet World Leadership in Animal Health Award in 2011, and the Gordon Memorial Medal in 2012. In 2014, she was the recipient of the ESCMID Excellence Award for Clinical Microbiology and Infectious diseases.

Prior to joining UF, she was elected as a member of the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Parliament. She served for two and a half years as Vice President of the Science, Culture, and Education Commission. During her years in the legislature, she authored Parliamentary resolutions and amendments related to infectious diseases, namely antimicrobial resistance, epidemic threats (Ebola), and emerging pathogens of plants and animals. She is also the survivor of a violent “fake news“ defamatory attack in which she was accused of being a bioterrorist, and of having committed crimes punishable with life imprisonment. This was based on a 10 year-old-secret investigation which was leaked to the press. All charges against her were dismissed, with clear evidence of “fabrication of accusations, in a context of happenings that had never occurred”.

Her vision for One Health is to progress beyond the human-animal-environment health triangle and to engage with other disciplines including economics, law, sustainability, politics, arts, and others. The stakeholder and decision-making perspective gained in Parliament is key to the realization of this multi-disciplinary approach and complements the scientific expertise which is essential in addressing global health issues.