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After obtaining a degree in biophysics, Antonino Cattaneo worked as a PhD student at the Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa) with Lamberto Maffei and as a postdoc and staff scientist with Rita Levi-Montalcini (Nobel Prize Laureate for discovery of NGF) at the CNR Institute of Neurobiology in Rome. He later worked with Cesar Milstein (Nobel Prize laureate for discovery of monoclonal antibodies) at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology (Cambridge, UK). From 1991 to 2008, he was Full Professor of Biophysics at the International School for Advanced Studies (SISSA) in Trieste (Italy), where he was Head of the Biophysics Department from 1991 to 1995 and the Deputy Director of SISSA from 1996 to 2001. Since 2008 he is Professor of Neurobiology at the Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa), where he is also the Director of the Biology Lab BioSnS. Antonino Cattaneo is author of more than 200 publications in peer-reviewed international scientific journals and is recipient of several awards including Domenico Marotta Prize (Accademia Nazionale delle Scienze detta XL), the W. Jansenius Medal (Slovak Academy of Sciences) and the "G. Tartufari" International Prize for Biology (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei). He is a member of EMBO (European Molecular Biology Organization) and member of the Accademia Nazionale delle Scienze detta XL, and member of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Since 2018 he is President of the European Brain Research Institute 'Rita Levi-Montalcini'.

Since May 2019 he is Member of the Scientific Committee of the Ri.MED Foundation.