

The Medical History of the Maltese Islands: Introduction

Medical History teaching in Malta

Teaching of Medical History in Malta

Attitudes towards the history of medicine saw a radical change in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the previous centuries, past medical works were considered standard reference texts and thus were regularly studied as part of the medical curriculum. The medical education in Malta followed similar attitudes. Thus at the turn of the eighteenth century, manuscript midwifery notes of lectures delivered by Dr. Francesco Butigieg to medical students during the period 18 October 1804 to 11 June 1806 include regular references to the medical literature of classical times, the medieval period, and to authors of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries ¹.

The importance of a medical history module in medical studies was recognised by many European medical schools in the eighteenth century, with one of the earliest chairs of the history of medicine being established in 1750 at the German medical schools of Wurzburg

¹ F. Butigieg: *Trattato dell'arte ostetrica dettato e spiegato del Perille Signor Dr. Francesco Butigieg nello studio publico del Grand Ospedale Nazionale di' Malta. Principiato li 18 Ottobre 1804.* m.s. in the holding of Dr. F. Vella Bardon; P. Cassar: Teaching of midwifery in Malta at the beginning of the nineteenth century. *St. Luke's Hospital Gazette*, 1973, 8(2):p.91-111

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and Gottingen. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the development of a new medical science resulting from the accelerated advances in medical progress. These advances changed the average practitioner's attitudes towards the history of medicine. Medical history thus started to be looked upon as the history of errors.

Nothing could be learned from it, and to study medical history and read the classical medical authors was nothing more than a waste of time. With the continuing exclusion of a medical history module, this view has apparently prevailed in the curriculum offered by the Faculty of Medicine & Surgery and the Institute of Health Care of the University of Malta.

While the mid-nineteenth century saw in Europe and America a change in attitudes towards medical history, there was contemporaneously a development in the outlook towards historical studies. History was no longer limited to the story of dynastic quarrels, of wars and treaties of peace; but it started to be looked at as the history of man including social aspects. This view of historical studies includes the history of medicine. As a result of the scientific advances in medical thought, the early decades of the nineteenth century saw a decline in medical history studies. Thus however was short-lived and in the second half of the nineteenth century the history

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of medicine became a critical historical discipline in which historians, philologists and physicians collaborated. Much of the work during this period was devoted towards the preparation of critical editions of basic sources. The first twentieth century research institute for medical history was founded in 1905 at the German University of Leipzig, while the first research institute in America was founded in 1929 at John Hopkins University. By 1937, medical history was being taught in 70% of medical schools, either as an elective or a required course with or without a compulsory final examination ². In contrast to the movement on the continent, medical history remains considered by the University authorities as being of concern to historians and sociologists alone, and of no interest to physicians. This attitude has persisted in spite of the enthusiasm of several Maltese physicians who have attempted to promote the introduction of a medical history module as an integral part of the medical curriculum.

The first proposal for the inclusion of the study of the History of Medicine in the medical curriculum offered by the University of Malta was made in 1842. Drs. T. Chetcuti and N. Zammit in their "*Rapporto ragionato della commissione incaricata dalla Societa` Medica di esaminare il progetto di studi relativamente alla medicina*" suggested that medical history should be taught over a period of five months in

² I. Gladston: *On the Utility of Medical History*. New York, 1957, p.35,41-44; H.E.

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the penultimate year of the academic course. This suggestion was however not acted upon, and the University failed to introduce a medical history module in the curriculum of medical studies³.

The need to promote the history of medicine in medical education was felt in the 1960s. In the St. Luke's Day Oration organised by the British Medical Association (Malta Branch) on the 18th October 1960, Prof. V.G. Griffiths emphasised the importance of including History of Medicine as an integral part of the medical curriculum⁴. A move to introduce a medical history module was initiated after 1964 by the medical historian and psychiatrist Dr. P. Cassar who offered to deliver a series of lectures on the medical history of Malta to the final year students. This offer was taken up by Prof. W. Ganado, Head of the Department of Medicine and the first lecture of a series of three was delivered on the 15 April 1964. These lectures were well received by the students.

Further enthusiasm towards the introduction of a medical history module was generated during 1964 by the University of Malta and the

Sigerist: *A History of Medicine*. University Press: Oxford, 1951, vol.1, p.3-6

³ T. Chetcuti, N. Zammit: *Rapporto ragionato della commissione incaricata dalla Societa` Medica di esaminare il progetto di studi relativamente alla medicina*. Malta, 1842, p.36

⁴ V.G. Griffiths: The Value of the History of Medicine in Medical Education. *St. Luke's Hospital Gazette*, 1966, 1(1):p.19-25

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Malta Branch of the British Medical Association who invited Prof. A. Pazzini, Professor of the History of Medicine at Rome University, to deliver a series of two lectures. A visit on the 8-13 June 1964 of Dr. K.F. Meyer, Director Emeritus of the G.W. Hooper Foundation of the University of California Medical Centre, generated further interest in the introduction of a medical history module and Prof. Ganado proposed the setting up of a Fellowship for the study of Maltese Medical History and also to establish a part-time University lectureship in the subject. The Malta Branch of the BMA took up the proposal in 1965, however the University authorities failed to institute the lectureship post presumably because of lack of funds⁵. The BMA (Malta) has since maintained an interest in medical history and has on St. Luke's Day organised annual lectures that often had a medical history flavour.

Dr. P. Cassar in 1966 again took up the initiative and offered gratis his services as an Honorary Teacher in the History of Medicine. He proposed a module consisting of a series of six lectures a year during the last two years of the course. While attendance was to be obligatory, there was to be no examination in the subject. This offer was forwarded to the Faculty Board of Medicine & Surgery for eventual transmission to University Senate and Council. The

⁵ P. Cassar: The Study of Medical History. *Journal of Educational Affairs*, 1975,

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University Senate in 1967 decided to leave the matter in abeyance until provision was made in the statute for the establishment of Honorary Lectureships. In spite of the reluctance of the University authorities to establish a lectureship post in the History of Medicine, Dr. Cassar was repeatedly invited to deliver lectures to medical students by the various heads of the Department of Medicine. Prof. W. Ganado in November 1966 assigned Dr. Cassar to deliver a series of four lectures on medical history, while his successor Prof. F.F. Fenech in October 1974 assigned him a series of two lectures ⁶.

In spite of the trade unionist strife between the Medical Association of Malta and the Government in 1977 which changed the Medical School administration, interest in medical history continued to be generated by the course co-ordinator Prof. G.P. Xwereb, and Dr. P. Cassar was asked to deliver a series of two lectures dealing with aspects of medical history in January 1979 ⁷. The interest in medical history teaching was further promulgated and formalised by being incorporated in the course of studies of the Foundation Course in Health Sciences. Thus the Guidebook for Medical Students published in 1986 notes that students were to be "*given talks on medical ethics*

1(1):p.6-14

⁶ P. Cassar: *ibid*, p.11-14

⁷ P. Cassar: *Milestones in forensic medicine development*. m.s. notes of lectures delivered 17th January and 24th January 1979 in holding of Dr. C. Savona-Ventura

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and the history of medicine" as part of the one week Briefing and Orientation Course. These talks dealt with the history of the development of Medicine and the history of medicine in Malta⁸. This initiative to include a medical history module was unfortunately not regularly maintained in the subsequent decade⁹. In the mid-1990s, the Curriculum Committee for the Faculty of Medicine & Surgery chaired by Prof. F.F. Fenech reviewed the Medical Course Curriculum and introduced a core module covering topics of a general nature common to the various courses in the Faculty of Medicine (including Pharmacy), the Faculty of Dental Surgery, and the Institute of Health Care. This core module was to run with a lecture every two weeks throughout the first two years of the medical course. These lectures were to include an undefined module dealing with the History of Medicine¹⁰. This module was however not promoted and the Medical Course Curriculum reviewed in 1999 completely ignored a lecture program in the History of Medicine¹¹.

⁸ *Guidebook for Medical Students*. University of Malta, 1986, p.10,13

⁹ *University of Malta Medical School. Prospectus 1990/91 Activities 1988-1990*. University Press: Malta, 1991; *University of Malta Medical School. Prospectus 1992/93 Activities 1991-1992*. University Press: Malta, 1993

¹⁰ F.F. Fenech: *University of Malta of Medical School. Faculty of Medicine and Surgery. Curriculum*. Medical School: Malta, n.d. [1995]

¹¹ M.P. Brincat: *University of Malta Medical School. Faculty Medicine and Surgery. Curriculum*. Medical School: Malta, 1999

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The concept of a core module covering topics of a general nature was partly introduced in 1999 by the organisation of a Colloquium for Medical Students by Prof. A.E. Felice in the Intermediate Course of Medicine and Surgery. Comprised of twenty-four total lectures delivered by several invited speakers during January-April 1999, the Colloquium included one lecture delivered by Dr. C. Savona-Ventura entitled "*Outlines on Maltese Medical History*" and one by Mr. C. Briffa entitled "*Three Maltese Physicians and writers*". A similar initiative was taken by the Institute of Health Care with the inclusion of lectures delivered by Dr. C. Savona-Ventura entitled "*History of Health Care*" delivered to the students of the Diploma in Health Service Management on 23 February 1998; "*The Law and the Midwife*" delivered to the Midwifery Diploma students annually since 1997; and "*A History of Nursing in Malta*" delivered to the BSc Nursing students on the 24th November 1999.

Over the last 150 years, the introduction of a medical history module as an integral part of the Medical Curriculum at the University of Malta has been characterised by a series of kick-starts which have failed to formalise the module. This contrasts with the curricula of other Universities in Europe and America where medical history is regularly taught to the undergraduate. The study of medical history broadens the physician's concepts of art and science and gives him a

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heightened awareness of himself and his work in relation to the events of the past and the present. The study of the history of medicine trains the physician to question even what appears to be scientific dogma today. The study of medical history helps to put current accepted scientific dogma in perspective and enables the physician to acknowledge the work of his predecessors who made giant strides often without any sound foundation of science. It remains imperative that the history of medicine is taught to the undergraduate and the introduction of a formal compulsory-attendance module in medical history is long overdue. The University of Malta should initiate measures for the introduction of a medical history module aimed at the medically-related faculties and institutes of the University of Malta in line with the proposals of the mid-1990s Curriculum Committee of the Faculty of Medicine & Surgery. This should be linked with the revival of the mid-1960s recommendations for the establishment of an Honorary Lectureship post in the History of Medicine. This lecture module should be designed to help outline the development of medicine from a magico-religious practice to an empirico-rational view of medicine that finally gave way to a scientific-rational practice.

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Medical History Collections in Malta: A Catalogue

The Maltese Islands still lacks a dedicated Medical History Museum but a number of collections with a medical historical import are scattered around the Islands. Besides those collections belonging to public organisations, there are also several items of medical historical interest in private holdings of various medical practitioners.

THE KNIGHTS HOSPITALLERS: This permanent exhibition housed in the basement of the Hospitaller Sacra Infermeria [now the Mediterranean Conference Centre] in Valletta is primarily set to show the Knights Hospitallers through their anguish and glory. It outlines the chivalrous world of the Knights of St. John in Malta and shows scenes with a medical history relevance. The exhibits reflect the suffering and injuries of the Crusades and the Great Siege of 1565 using life-size and scaled models. There are in addition scaled models of the Sacra Infermeria Wards and operation & dissection rooms allowing an insight of the workings of the hospital. Life-size models showing an apothecary shop and operative procedures being undertaken are also included. Life-size portrait models of prominent Maltese medical personnel are also present. Another section deals

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with the French occupation in Malta, again with reference to the medical situation; and the 1813 plague epidemic ¹².

SIR TEMI ZAMMIT'S LABORATORY: This is another permanent exhibition that relates to the history of Brucella infection research in Malta. The exhibit consists of the restored laboratory sited in the top floor of the Castellana Palace [now the Medical & Health.Department] in Valletta. Here Sir Temi Zammit conducted his experiments leading to the association of the Brucella infection with goat's milk ¹³.

UNIVERSITY & MEDICAL SCHOOL COLLECTIONS: The Medical School at Pieta houses a permanent exhibition of old medical instruments (late 18-early 20th century). It also houses a series of 18th-19th century medical certificates and oil paintings of prominent medical personalities. The Pathology Department has further set up a small exhibition showing various instruments used in laboratory diagnosis.

¹² *Relieve & Experience The Knights Hospitallers*. Brochure advertising the exhibition, 2p. n.d.

¹³ *Sir Temi Zammit's Laboratory*. Inaugural publication. Department of Health and Information: Malta, 1980, +14p.

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The Medical School further houses the John Hookman Frere Memorial Library that includes the various medical books that the philanthropist had donated to the Public Library circa 1833-34¹⁴. The Medical School Library also owns a number of 19th century books that have been donated by various individuals.

The Anatomy Department at the University of Malta at Msida owns a number of 18-19th century wax and paper anatomical models besides an number of surgical and obstetric instruments.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HOSPITALS: The Medical Superintendent's Office and the Board Room at St. Luke's Hospital at Gwardamangia house several old surgical instruments and a number of oil paintings depicting medical personalities.

The Department of Health at Valletta holds a number of majolica pharmacy jars, the staff and medallion worn by the *Protomedicus* during the Hospitaller period and several oil paintings pertaining to individuals who have contributed in some way to Maltese medicine, including one of Lady Scarpa who supported the opening of the first woman's hospital in Malta.

¹⁴ P. Cassar: *The John Hookham Frere Memorial Medical Library and the Origins of*

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The Board Room at Gozo General Hospital at Victoria holds a number of old medical instruments.

A Museum related to the history of psychiatric practice in Malta has been set up in the mental hospital "Our Lady of Mount Carmel Hospital" at Attard. This holds not only items specific to the management of psychiatric disorders, such as those used for restraint and electrical apparatus for ECT, but also general nursing and medical management instruments. The Museum also holds the items used in occupational and recreational therapy.

OTHER GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS & INSTITUTIONS:

The Maritime Museum holds the surgeon's instrument kit that previously belonged to Prof. Salvatore Luigi Pisani. Several old majolica pharmacy jars are housed in various government ministry offices and some also in the Museum of Fine Arts. The latter also holds some of the silverware used in the Hospitaller hospitals.

The archaeological collections - pertaining to the neolithic and classical periods - holds several items that have a medical bearing including shaman tools, amulets, infant feeding bottles besides the skeletal collections.

the Malta Medial School Library. University Press: Malta, 1985, +37p.

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CHURCH COLLECTIONS: St. Agatha Museum holds several archaeological items that relate to medical practice, besides the skeletal remains. The Vittoriosa Church Museum holds a number of medical books, a doctor's certificate and church items used during the plague epidemics. The Wignacourt Museum at Rabat holds a number of 18-19th century pharmacy jars and has an exhibit relating to St. Paul's Earth.