

LOOKING BACK

THE MALTA CHOLERA EPIDEMIC IN 1837

SAVIOUR PISANI, M.D.

The cholera epidemic which reached Malta in 1837 originated in Tessory in India in July 1817. The disease spread fast reaching Calcutta on the 10th September 1818 after attacking intermediary points such as Ahmed Nuggur, Poonah and Panwel. It was in Madras by October 1818. From there it spread outside India, reaching Ceylon in January 1819, Mauritius on the 29th October 1819 and Borbone in January 1820. By the year 1829 it had reached the frontier of Siberia and in 1837, after having infected more than 62,000,000 individuals, it appeared in Malta.

The credit for diagnosing it first goes to Dr. S. Axisa, the physician to the Hospital for Old People in Floriana. On the 9th June 1837 he was asked to see two inmates who were suffering from a severe illness. From a letter that he wrote on the 22nd August 1838 we learn that their main symptoms had been a thready pulse, cold skin of a livid colour, cramps and suppression of urine. These two patients were already on the point of death. On questioning it was learnt that the previous evening they had eaten only some meat and drunk some wine but by midnight they were suffering from severe vomiting, diarrhoea and hoarseness.

Dr. Axisa immediately took the necessary steps to inform the Health Auth-

orities. His diagnosis was upheld by Dr. L. Gravagna, the Police Physician but Dr. Clarke the Inspector General to the Military Hospitals disagreed with them. Other physicians were called in. Dr. G. Portelli was of the same opinion as his Maltese colleagues but a certain Dr. Lawson maintained that this was not Asiatic Cholera but a variant of Mild Cholera.

Amidst this disagreement among physicians the disease continued to spread. The first victims of the epidemic were Paul Attard aged 80 years from Gozo and Francis Abdilla, 70 years, from Zebbug, who died, comforted by the Holy Sacraments. The following three days showed a sharp rise in cases. By noon of the 13th June 1837, 27 persons had been attacked, of whom 17 had died by then. Since by now the diagnosis had been established the inmates of the "Ospizio", 750 old and insane people were transferred to Fort Ricasoli. On the 14th June 1837 the official confirmation of the presence of the disease was published in the Malta Government Gazette:

"We regret to state that on Friday last several cases of severe illness appeared among the inmates of the Ospizio or Asylum for the aged and indigent poor at Floriana. Steps were immediately taken to examine into the nature of the disease

and according to the opinion of the principal Medical Officers, both English and Maltese, there seems to be no doubt that the patients were attacked by Cholera, which as yet has assumed an entirely sporadic character, being confined within the walls of the building. No case even of a suspicious nature has occurred in the any other part of the Island. Up to yesterday at 12 o'clock the number of persons attacked was 27, out of which 17 have died; the remainder of the inmates amounting to 750 aged men and women were in good health.

There being reason to believe that the malady may have been occasioned by a local cause the Governor has given orders for the removal of the whole establishment of the Ospizio to Fort Ricasoli who has for this reason been vacated by the troops. It is to be hoped that, by so prompt and humane a measure, the disease will be checked, the situation being isolated. Notwithstanding which His Excellency has given directions to the proper authorities to take every measure that may be thought necessary for the preservation of the public health should the disease show itself in any other part of these possessions.

In the meantime pursuant to a resolution of the Board of Health, the substance of the above mentioned circumstances is inserted in the bills of health granted to vessels clearing out from this island."

Since the disease seemed to be getting out of hand it was decided to nominate certain gentlemen to supervise the cases of cholera and to help to check its spread. The names of these gentlemen who were to compose "The Central Committee for the Supervision of Cases of Cholera" were published in the Malta Government Gazette of the 21st June 1837 though the Committee had already been working on the problem for two days. The names that appeared on the Gazette were the following:

President: Count Baldassare Sant
Baron Vincenzo Azzopardi
Dr. Clark, *Assistant Inspector of Hospitals*

Giuseppe Azzopardi de Baroni Gauci
Dr. L. Gravagna, *Police Physician*
Dr. Liddell, *Physician to Naval Hospitals*

Nicholas Nugent, *Treasurer to Government*

Major Ward, *Royal Engineer*

George Ward Esq., *Secretary*.

Four days later the powers with which this committee was invested were published in the Gazette:

1. The Governor or Central Committee with his approbation were empowered to issue orders at any time with a view to prevent the spread of cholera within these possessions.

2. Orders certified by the Secretary to the Central Committee were to be published in the same mode as Government Notices, and were to be received as evidence of the date and contents of such orders.

3. Penalties, amounting to no less than five pounds but not less than one pound sterling were to be incurred by those who violated such orders.

4. Non payment of fines was punishable by imprisonment (4s. corresponding to one day).

5. The Ordinance was to remain in force for one month.

The first meeting of the Committee took place on the 19th June. It was decided to hold a meeting every day at 11 a.m. and that five members would form a quorum. The next day was to show the trend which was to be followed by the Committee in its meetings. The first decision was to abandon the Quarantine restrictions currently existing in Fort Ricasoli. This decision was to be followed by another on the 24th June to the effect that anyone wanting to leave the fort could do so, provided, of course, he had relations and friends ready to take care of him.

It appears that a considerable number of inmates at Fort Ricasoli availed themselves of this offer for four days later there appeared a note in the Gazette to this effect:

"The inmates of the Ospizio who were removed to Fort Ricasoli, as we have already stated, have suffered in the great-

est degree, although within the last few days, the attacks have decreased considerably, the new cases yesterday being only six, the deaths fifteen. On the visit of H.E. to the hospital there, on Sunday evening, he was pleased to express his satisfaction at the medical arrangements which had been made for the care of the sick, and the zeal with which the two chaplains of the establishment had discharged their spiritual duties; they are now assisted by the Capuchin Fathers. None of the unfortunate victims of the disease died without the comforts of religion in their last moments. All those who were without suspicion of disease, and who had friends to assist them, have been allowed an outdoor pittance, with permission to withdraw themselves from the establishment for the present, and about 120 have already availed themselves of this humane measure adopted by H.E."

Looking back with our knowledge of the epidemiology of cholera this decision, although undoubtedly humane and though it certainly saved the lives of many of the former inmates of the Ospizio, certainly helped to spread the disease throughout the rest of the island. However, the authorities thought otherwise for it was their opinion that cholera was not a contagious disease. Thus on the 21st June the Committee was compelled to write to the Governor "to be moved to issue a notification on the subject of the mischievous reports in circulation as to the contagious nature of the prevailing epidemic". On the 21st June 1837 the following notice on the Malta Government Gazette:

Minute by His Excellency the Governor:

"His Excellency the Governor learns, with no less surprise than regret, that several individuals and amongst them some few Maltese medical practitioners, have industrially (*sic*) circulated their opinions, that the partial epidemic which has visited this island is of a decidedly contagious nature. A more cruel and unfounded doctrine cannot be promulgated, a doctrine opposed to the solemn decision of the most prominent medical men, collectively and individually, in the civilized

world, and H.E. cannot but express his astonishment that these unpractised persons should presume to set up their unauthorised opinions, on occasion of such vital importance, in opposition to such high and unquestionable authority. The persistence therefore in such conduct, on the part of those in the employment of the Government, will immediately draw upon them the displeasure of H.E., and will operate as a disqualification for those who may hereafter become candidates for further situations."

This note was followed by another, dated the 22nd June, refuting the theory expounded by Dr. L. Galea, Conte Nicolo Gatt and Dr. G. Sammut that the disease was contagious. However, although the disease was not considered contagious the value of cleanliness was not disregarded by the Committee. Thus on Monday the 26th June it was resolved to keep the cellars of Valletta as clean as possible and to send a note to the Supervisor of the Markets asking him to issue an order forbidding the slaughter of the larger animals in the market.

The situation at this time was still moderately satisfactory. The Government thought it would be wise to discourage panic.

"Although the cases and deaths among the aged poor at Fort Ricasoli are so numerous it furnished no ground for despondency to the rest of the population, when it is considered that at the late period of life at which they had arrived, their impaired constitutions could not have been in a state to resist the attack of any active disease. Among the troops it will be seen that the disease has made little progress" (M.G.G. 21st June, 1837).

The Committee supervised very closely the activities of the medical profession. On the 27th June Mr. Mamo, an apothecary of the Civil Hospitals was severely admonished for distributing quills filled with quicksilver as a treatment for cholera. The chief objection of the Committee was that such quackery would not only lead to a false sense of security in the general public, making all precautions of security advocated by the

authorities seemingly futile. A phlebotomist, a certain Mr. Falzon, was admonished on the same day for failing to attend promptly to patients who required blood letting.

The line taken on the non-contagiousness of the disease was having its effects on the medical profession. A bleeder, Mr. Matrenza, who appeared before the Committee on the 29th June on charges of having refused to attend to a patient answered that he had done so because of the risk of becoming infected but now that the Committee had dictated otherwise he would have no objection to bleed these patients.

However, other practitioners were not so easily persuaded. One of these was Dr. G. B. Saydon of No. 3 Std. Nuova, Cospicua, who appearing before the council on the 12th July maintained that he was an uncompromising contagionist. Therefore the Commission was forced to quote authorities on the subject. A typical note appeared in the Gazette of the 28th June, 1837:

“The undersigned physicians and surgeons of the Hotel Dieu think it their duty to declare, in the interest of truth, that although up to the present time, the hospital has received the greatest number of persons affected with cholera, they have not observed any circumstance which authorises them to suspect that the disease is contagious.”

Signed: Petit, Husson, Sanson, Magendie, Hanon, etc.

Done at the Hotel Dieu, Paris, 31st March, 1832.

Meanwhile the state of Valletta was causing a lot of concern. It was proposed to keep two dispensaries open at points as far removed from each other as possible during the night. The following roster was finally agreed upon:

- 1st night — Drs. Fenech and Duclos Std. Reale
- 2nd night — Drs. Garzini Std. Teatro and Dupont Std. Mercanti
- 3rd night — Drs. Parnis Std. Teatro and Portelli Std. Mercanti

4th night — Drs. Ricardi Std. Teatro and Stilon Std. Giovanni

5th night — Drs. Biancardi Std. Teatro and Gatt Std. Giovanni

6th night — Drs. Engerer Std. Forni and Aquilina Std. Paolo

The state of the Mandraggio was also worrying the Committee for on the 1st July a memorandum was sent to keep the place as free from disease as possible. Two days later another was sent to prevent sick people from the villages from using the hospitals of the cities. The arguments used were that the transport of such sick patients would certainly lead to their death and the accumulation of large numbers of sick people in the cities would certainly lead to a greater spread of the disease.

The state of Senglea was hardly better for by the 30th June the Archpriest of that city was informing the authorities that he had only 19 more empty tombs and if the disease was to continue he proposed the opening of the ancient plague burial ground. He also complained of a complete absence of phlebotomists and exhorted the authorities to send medical supplies to the afflicted city.

As the incidence of the epidemic reached its climax it was appreciated that the poor and those of low physique were the worst affected. Therefore a committee composed of 21 members under the presidency of Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Briggs was elected for the “Relief of the Destitute Poor”. It was decided that:

“The Committee acting on the opinion of the medical profession that one of the best preventives against attacks of cholera is a regulated subsistence on wholesome food, have resolved that a subscription be opened for the purpose of supplying the destitute poor therewith and also for the purpose of relieving them in any such other manner as the committee may deem expedient. It is however to be clarified that the extensive prevalence of the epidemic under which the island is suffering is the only reason for opening this subscription and that as soon as the disease

TABLE 4
Incidence of cholera in the island of Gozo
during the epidemic

MONTH	ATTACKED	DIED	CURED
July	532	187	181
August	220	137	241
September	57	42	-
Totals	809	366	422

The official thanksgiving for the restoration of the public health took place on the 23rd October when a Solemn Service and "Te Deum" were celebrated in the church of St. John. The Archbishop

with the Chapter of the Cathedral officiated at the ceremony which was attended by a large congregation including the elite of the island amongst them the Governor, the Naval Commander-in-Chief, H.M. Judges and Rear Admiral Briggs.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the staff of the Royal Malta Library without whose services this work would have been impossible.

References

- TOMASO CHETCUTI: Notizie Storiche e patologiche linche sul Cholera che divampò in Malta e Gozo nell'estate del 1837, Malta 1838.
 Manuscripts 1331, 1271 Royal Malta Library.