

The Practice of Medicine in Gozo 200 Years Ago

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Abstract

This article looks at the administrative, social and economic situation of Gozo between 1813 and 1815, as part of a crown colony. The practice of medicine in Gozo is described according to medical notes written by a practicing barber-surgeon named Calcedonio Speranza. These notes are contained in a notebook found at the National Library in Valletta. This manuscript reflects several aspects of the health conditions in Gozo 200 years ago. This document is the only notebook about a surgeon's practice that we know of and its contents give a fairly good account of the types of illnesses present at that time. It also provides a first-hand record of medico-legal reports about trauma, post-mortem reports and death certificates.

Historical Background

After the capitulation of the French, Gozo again became part of Malta which was part of the British Empire. The Gozo civil administration was headed by a governor appointed by the Civil Commissioner who was responsible for the whole administration of the Maltese Islands and who eventually became known as the Governor of Malta. The first governor was Sir Thomas Maitland (1759 - 1824), who poorly loved Gozo, because the first thing he did, through a proclamation on 15 October 1814, was to suppress the office of the Governor of Gozo – “since His Excellency the Governor is the only representative of His Majesty,... it is impossible to recognise any other person with the title or power united to such an office” (Bezzina, 1985: 37). The last Governor of Gozo was Filippo Castagna (1756 - 1830)¹. Thus, the total administration of Gozo, both civil and military, fell into the hands of an English person, Archibald Dalzell, who was appointed directly by the Governor of Malta as the “Collector of H.M.’s Land Revenue” for Gozo,

(Gauci, 1995: 4) without the Gozitans having any say in the management of their island. So much so that in 1813 the Gozitans petitioned the authorities claiming that they were being treated as “inferior citizens” (Gauci, 1994).

At the beginning of the British administration, around 16,000 people resided in Gozo, 5000 of which within the walls of the Citadel and its suburb Rabat, and the rest in six villages. Famine and disease were common along with labour shortages and the neglect of the island by the central administration. As a consequence, the population of Gozo, by the year 1811, dropped to 12,766, and after that year it started to climb back slowly. It took another downward turn when in 1813 the plague epidemic broke out, lasting seven months and during which about a hundred people died in Gozo. The plague epidemic affected the



The first Governor of Malta – Sir Thomas Maitland.

¹ Filippo Castagna was a notable anti-French insurgent and with the British take-over, he became Governor of Gozo for twelve years (Source: Giovanni Bonello, Sunday Times of Malta, 24 July 2011).

cotton business because of quarantine reasons, and therefore, the Gozitan economy, like that in mainland Malta, took a downward turn.

During this time the main hospital in Gozo was situated in St Francis Square. It was designed by François de Mondion and received the first patients in 1728. It was dedicated to St John the Baptist and St Anthony. In 1887, soon after the granting of the title of ‘City’ to Rabat, it was renamed ‘Victoria Hospital’². The hospital staff consisted of two doctors, two surgeons, a cook, a watchman and an accounts clerk who took care of expenses. The sacraments were given by the parish of St George and in the hospital itself there were two chapels, one dedicated to St Anthony of Padua and the other to Sts Cosmas and Damian. The hospital also had a fairly large kitchen and was said to have had well-prepared food (Cassar, 1964: 68). The enlarged hospital was opened in 1838 and was dedicated to St John the Baptist, protector of the Order of the Knights. The old section of the hospital began to function as a geriatric residence.

It is not known how many doctors and surgeons in all practised in Gozo at that time. Also we do not know much about the surgeon Calcedonio Speranza. Most probably he hailed from Malta and moved to Gozo. It is likely that from the contents of the medical diary he kept he was one of the two barber-surgeons of the hospital and he was responsible for carrying out post-mortem examinations when required. Records show that he had been appointed a barber-surgeon at the Gozo Hospital after serving for a number of years as a barber-surgeon in the Order’s navy. Therefore, we definitely know that he was a product of eighteenth century medicine when there was a distinct separation between a *fisico*, a physician or medical doctor and a *chirurgo*, a surgeon. The former received formal medical education in a university and usually knew how to speak and write in Latin.

The first *Collegio Medico* was set up as part of the University on 25 May 1771³ although doctors used to study in medical schools abroad such as Salerno and Montpellier. After returning to Malta

they had to spend a number of years practising at the Holy Infirmary before they were allowed to practise privately.

The surgeons, on the other hand, had no formal medical education in a medical school but they took up ‘surgical practice’ as a trade by enrolling at a very young age as apprentices at the Holy Infirmary. Here they followed anatomy lectures and attended surgical interventions and post-mortem examinations. After a number of years of such training they became *barberotti* or barber-surgeons.

The Manuscript

The ms. (Libr. 1432) is in the form of a notebook measuring 21cm by 15cm and consisting of forty-six pages hand written on both sides of the page in very dark ink. From page thirty-six onwards the

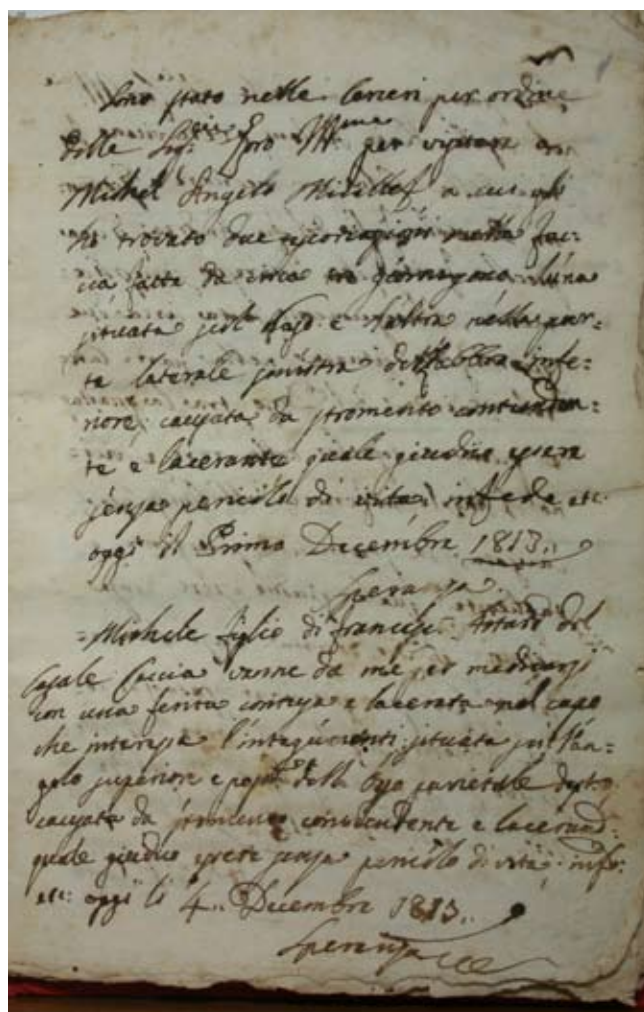


Figure 1. Notes written in Italian, signed “Speranza”.

² Personal communication with Rev. Dr Joseph Bezzina, Assistant National Archivist.

³ University of Malta website: History of the University. Available online at: <http://www.um.edu.mt/about/uom/history> [Accessed on 18 December 2014.]

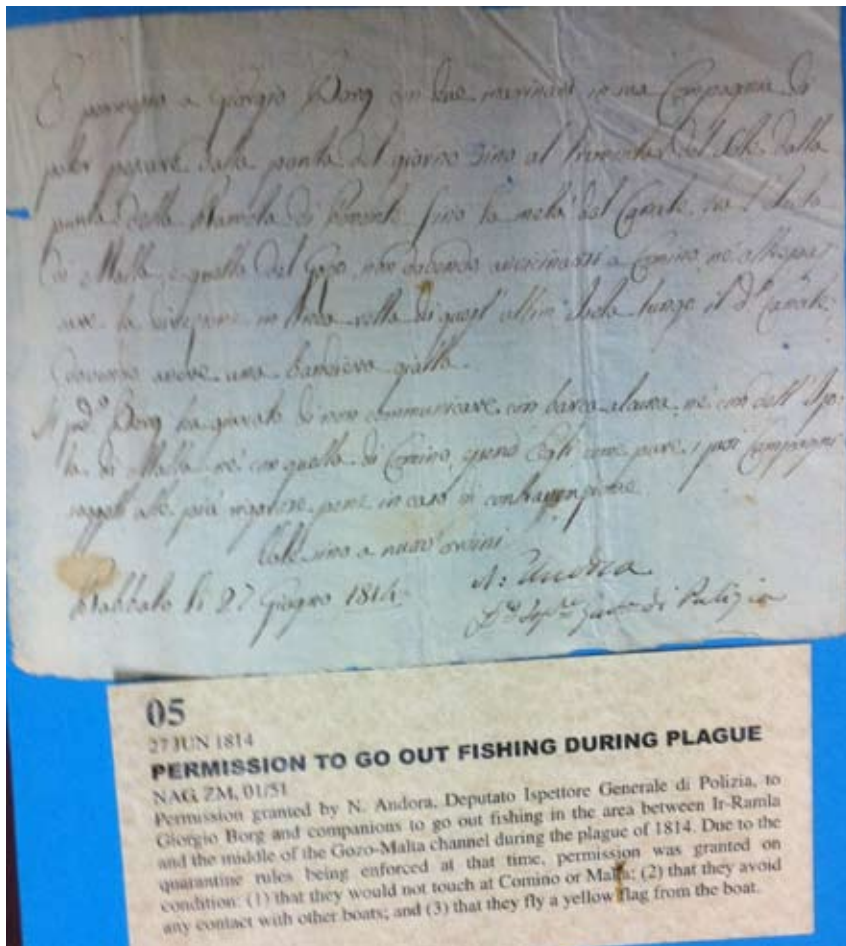


Figure 3. Permission to go out fishing during plague.

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An interesting issue during the plague in Gozo was that the police gave permission to fishermen (see Figure 3) to go out fishing in the area between Ir-Ramla and the middle of the Gozo-Malta channel on condition that they could not touch land on Comino or Malta and that they fly a yellow flag from their boat (Bezzina, 2014: 14).

It seems that Calcedonio Speranza was not involved directly in any case of plague. In his diary he mentioned the epidemic in an indirect way in a death certificate he issued on 2 May 1814 which was addressed to the *Protomedicus* (Chief Government Medical Officer). Speranza wrote the following: “Guzeppe... of the late M... of about eighty years of age died this morning of diarrhoea in the Male Division of the (General) Hospital. I have examined his whole body and found no suspicious signs of plague. In witness of the truth thereof I sign (this certificate) with my own hand”.

Other cadavers examined by Speranza revealed no signs of a “suspicious illness”. We know that he continued to examine the corpses of patients who died during this period for signs of plague until 27 January 1815, well after the plague had disappeared. The reason for this was that all those who died of the plague were buried in a special cemetery in Xaghra and no sick person suspected of having the plague was brought to the hospital for treatment.

The Smallpox Epidemic

The barber-surgeon Speranza had a more active role during the smallpox epidemic which occurred in Gozo in 1814. On 1 September 1814, Speranza received instructions from Dr Cutajar, who was the Acting *Protomedico* of Gozo (see Figure 4), to report to him in writing regarding every person suspected of having contracted smallpox so that he would in turn report the cases to the *Protomedico* of

Malta as requested by the Governor of Malta. It seems that Speranza carried out these instructions as best he could as indeed he issued no less than 39 reports of smallpox relating to children, between 8 July 1814 and 16 June 1815. Speranza, in his diary, also mentioned that in some cases smallpox was complicated by “dysentery” or “obstruction of vital organs”.

It is not known how many persons died from this disease. In one particular entry Speranza wrote: “G. M. son of S. Z., four years old passed from this life to a better one. He suffered from smallpox and dysentery and died after an illness lasting a month. I have inspected his body but found no signs of a contagious illness (bubonic plague) except the scars of smallpox. In truth thereof I sign my name by my own hand today 30 July 1814”.

Smallpox was a dreaded disease around the Mediterranean basin with epidemics in Malta being reported in the late 17th and 18th centuries (Savona-Ventura, 2005: 67). After Edward Jenner published his observations of vaccinations with

cow-pox virus, the procedure of vaccination was very quickly taken up and promoted by the British Authorities. Vaccination in Malta started in December 1800 on all naval personal based in Malta and later on, on Maltese children (Savona-Ventura, 2005: 69).

Other Diseases

Other infectious diseases which Speranza came across in his practice during this period included a case of tetanus. On 10 September 1814 he saw a girl with wounds in her right index and middle fingers after she sustained a fall. Speranza wrote in his diary that there was gangrene of the middle finger and tetanus appeared on the ninth day. On 5 January 1815 he wrote that some two years before he had seen a certain Maria... for *lue confirmata* (syphilis) as shown by ulcers in her throat and the articular pains she had. He treated her with mercurial inunctions or ointments which were the accepted treatment available at that time. Speranza reported another case of syphilis in a girl of three-and-a-half years. He observed that the girl “contracted the disease from her parents”. In his report he wrote that the girl presented with ulcers

in her mouth and her privy parts. He reported this case on 24 September 1814.

Speranza mentioned, without giving any details, two cases of “obstruction” of the spleen accompanied with long standing “dysentery”. Speranza made these observations from post-mortem examinations. From another post-mortem examination on the body of an eight year old, a certain B.T., Speranza noted that this child died “in consequence of a lung disease and loss of blood but he found no signs of a contagious illness.” This note is dated 23 July 1814. It should be noted that when Speranza mentioned a “contagious illness” he was referring to bubonic plague even though dysentery is also considered a contagious illness.

Mentioned, rather quite briefly, as causes of death are seven cases of “dysentery” in adults, five cases of unspecified fever and a case of erysipelas of the right leg attributed to a prick from a scissors and made worse by neglect and bad treatment.

Other causes of death which Speranza mentioned in his diary included a case of a foetus who died after a difficult labour and was found with the cord round the neck and another foetus who died “after receiving baptism at home” also after a difficult labour presented with prolapse of the right hand and died in spite of all “operations” carried out. He also reported that the mother survived the ordeal. Speranza reported about seven cases of infants and children who died due to convulsions, one of which “ascribed to dentition.”

Another entry reports a spinal “tumour” found in a girl. He described this tumour as a large swelling filled with “lymph” situated over the lumbar vertebrae. The tumour was “penetrating” inside the vertebrae. Speranza ascribed the origin of this tumour to a severe fall of the mother during pregnancy and according to Speranza the girl could in no way “escape death”. This report is dated 22 May 1814.

It is to be noted that in those days there was no standard official form of a death certificate. Speranza used different forms of phrases in his “death certificates” like: “cessò di vivere (ceased to live) or passed to “eternal life” or more euphemistically “from this life to a better one”.



Figure 4. Instructions from the Acting Protomedico of Gozo.

Reports Written by Speranza

Speranza also included in his diary a number of medico-legal reports which he wrote for the law courts. In one particular report addressed to *Signori Loro Illustrissimi* (Your Most Illustrious Sirs) dated 16 December 1813 he wrote as follows: “I have gone at your behest to the village of Ghajnsielem, in the vicinity of the Qala Cross, to examine G.B., son of the late Andrea. He suffers from a small wound involving the skin caused two days ago by a sharp-pointed instrument. It is situated in the left side of the back between the fourth and fifth ribs near the inferior angle of the scapula. It does not constitute any danger to life; on the contrary I consider it to be of a slight nature so much so that it is already healing with a scar. In truth thereof I append my signature by my own hand”.

He also wrote reports in conjunction with other doctors. A case in point is one dated 14 February 1814 and issued together with Dr Arpa and Dr Pace

(see Figure 5): “We have been to the public prison to examine G.Z. We have carefully examined his genital organs and found that his right testicle was swollen due to venereal disease (*lue venerea*) contracted some time ago and left untreated. He complains of pain in his urethra and of difficulty of micturition. Besides he has been suffering from joint pains all his life. On account of these impairments to his health he is unfit to undergo strict imprisonment and to live in a humid environment as such conditions may result in grave prejudice to his health”. From this report one can see the appalling conditions in which prisoners were kept. Later on the prisoner was seen again by the same doctors and he was offered mercurial treatment and it was recommended that the prisoner should be transferred to the hospital where he would benefit from the medical and surgical treatments available there. The doctors also recommended that the patient would need regular exercise to “move his humours” as “confinement to bed would result in great harm with aggravation of his illness”. This reported is dated 9 April 1814.

Speranza also used to perform post-mortems for the courts. On 1 March 1814 he was appointed to perform a post-mortem examination on the body of a murdered man admitted to hospital. In his report to the courts, Speranza wrote: “After carefully examining the body I found the following lesions: (a) three wounds, the first on the left side of the neck; and the other two on the trunk which are not penetrating ones and are of no importance. The neck wound is about five *polici* (inches) deep and filled with clots of blood from severance of the subclavian artery; (b) no pathological changes in the internal organs beyond turgidity in the lobes of the lungs derived from the spread of blood from the neck wound. I consider that the severance of the (subclavian) artery, was the cause of death which under the above circumstances was inevitable”. Obviously post-mortem reports at that time were not as detailed as today but once the cause of death was established it was deemed to be enough.

On 2 February 1815 Speranza performed an autopsy on the body of a woman who was found in a well in Gharb. From the post-mortem examination he certified that the woman died from obstruction of respiration from drowning due to her falling into the cistern.

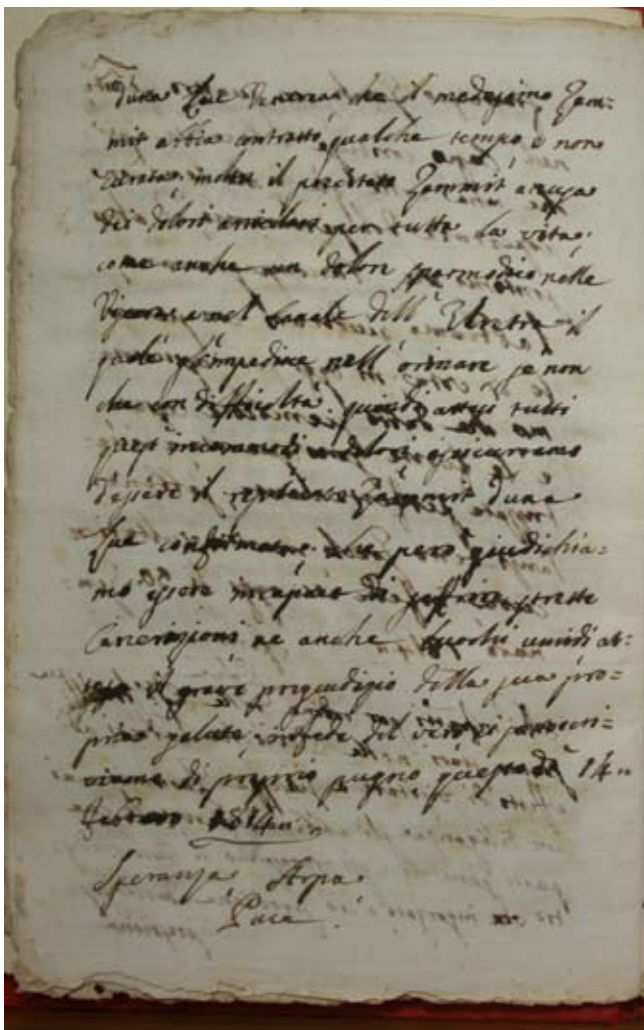


Figure 5. Report written by Speranza.

On some occasions he was also assigned by the courts the task of a veterinary practitioner to assess the fitness for human consumption of injured animals such as cows. This was done to exclude any signs indicative of disease in the animals so that no harm was brought to humans on consuming the meat.

In the diary there are a number of certificates about various injuries involving different parts of the human body which Speranza examined. From a total of sixty-six injuries only two were declared by Speranza as serious and therefore presented a danger to life; one involving the lower abdomen and extending to the sacrum, and a lacero-contused wound on the skull over the sagittal suture with exposure of the bone. In one particular case, dated 28 November 1814, he saw a patient with a contusion on the left iliac crest probably caused by a blunt instrument. Later the patient developed fever and spasmodic abdominal pains. Speranza issued a preliminary certificate and reserved the right to issue another report later on. Unfortunately no further reference was made to this case and so we do not know the outcome.

On some occasions Calcedonio Speranza also issued certificates of “cure”. In a particular entry he stated that “I certify that about five years ago the wife of M. Z. was under my care for the French Disease⁶ (*morbo gallico*) for which she received a *cura universale* (i.e. a course of mercurial inunctions). Since then she has been enjoying perfect health”. He also reported about another case which ten years previously he had treated a patient for a serious wound considered to be life threatening but after treatment the patient “was perfectly cured”.

Conclusion

This manuscript is of great importance as, apart from being a unique document of its kind, it gives a snapshot of the medical practice 200 years ago. The period covered is only of seventeen months but it is enough to provide a first-hand record of the medico-legal aspects of injuries and death in the form of reports presented to the law courts.

It also shows that the medical practitioner was expected to be knowledgeable and competent in all branches of medical practice. The manuscript is particularly of great value as all records pertaining to the years 1813-15 have been lost from the National Library⁷.

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⁶ Syphilis was also known as the French disease.

⁷ Personal communication with Rev. Dr Joseph Bezzina