

# A NOTE ON THE ECONOMICS OF MEDICAL PRACTICE IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MALTA

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The medical man is traditionally regarded as being dedicated to the relief of human suffering and motivated by a sentimental compassion for the needy sick. Because of this dignified calling he is held in high esteem by the community which he serves. This image of the doctor's apostolate, however, tends to blur the fact that there is also an economics of medicine since a practitioner adopts the medical profession as a career and, therefore, expects to make a rewarding livelihood from it. This paper deals with this facet of the practice of medicine in Malta in so far as the financial aspects of the care and treatment of opulent and highly placed members of the Order of St. John during part of the eighteenth century were concerned.

When a knight died his creditors applied to obtain their due from his *spoglio* i.e. the effects existing at the time of his demise. Their names for the second half of the eighteenth century are recorded in

three hitherto unpublished manuscript volumes bearing the title *Minutorio dell' audienza* (Arch. 675, 676 & 677).

The applicants are of all kinds — goldsmiths, tailors, coalsellers, manufacturers of gloves and stockings, notaries and even the *compnia dei comici* (theatrical company) which sought payment for the hiring of boxes at the Manoel Theatre. Among this motley band of creditors figure our ancestral colleagues — the physicians and surgeons — and their auxiliaries i.e. the *aromatario* (pharmacist), the *maestro di fisica* (physic master), the *prattico* (assistant surgeon), the *barberotto* (barber-surgeon) and the *cavasanguie* (phlebotomist or bleeder).

Except in occasional instances, the requests for payment are written in a uniform stereotyped manner. Here are two typical specimens (translated from the original Italian): "Dr. Carlo Perdon demands to be paid from the *spoglio* of the

late Commandeur Mellos for services rendered during fourteen months' treatment of his chronic illness" (26th March 1759) and "The pharmacist Agostino Schembri requests to be paid from the above named *spoglio* the sum of two *scudi* being the price of the medicaments supplied to him during his last illness" (15th January 1759) (*Arch.* 675). (A *scudo* was the equivalent of about 8 cents, the *tari* about 6 mils and a *grano* about 0.4 mils).

Very often more than one practitioner attended the same patient. Usually the medical team consisted of a physician, a surgeon, a barber-surgeon and a pharmacist but sometimes it was more numerous; thus the Venerable Bali B. Martino Plata was looked after by the *protomedico* (physician-in-chief) Lorenzo Thei, Dr. Michel'Angelo Grima, surgeon Saverio Micallef, assistant surgeon Giuseppe Mallia, barber-surgeon Giuseppe Grech and pharmacist Gaetano Mallia while Grand Master Emmanuel Marie de Rohan was attended by the same *protomedico*, Dr. Giuseppe Maria Grech, physician and surgeon Aurelio Badat, surgeon Angelo Ventura and the two pharmacists Gio Maria Grech and Antonio Gatt (*Arch.* 677a).

The fees of the physician, surgeon and physic-master were assessed according to (a) the duration of professional attendance in days, months and even years; in one instance the period covered was as long as twenty-two years, the patient having suffered from "an inveterate and incurable disease of the urinary bladder" (1759) (*Arch.* 675); or (b) the number of consultations and day and night visits the latter distinction being necessary because night visits were assessed at a higher rate; thus we come across references to "three visits a day"; eight entire nights "without undressing"; "twenty-eight visits and four days of continuous attendance"; six hundred and ninety-three visits, fifty-seven of which at night; nine hundred and three visits over a period of two years; and even a figure of two thousand one hundred and ninety visits spread over three years (*Arch.* 676a); and (c) some special type of procedure such as "the administration for two months of mercurial treatment" (*Arch.* 676b); the application of leeches and vesicants; per-

forming bleedings and cuppings; giving steam-baths; "twenty-three introductions of the catheter" (*laingaria*) and operative treatment the nature of which is not stated (*Arch.* 675, *Arch.* 676c, *Arch.* 677b).

The pharmacist at times carried out surgical treatment. Although as a rule the two "arts" of the surgeon and of the pharmacist were mutually exclusive, pharmacists who lived in the countryside, where the services of a surgeon were not easily available, were allowed to carry out "base surgery", i.e. cupping, extraction of teeth and bloodletting, by permission of the Grand Master (*Arch.* 1195). Thus in 1758 the pharmacist Alessandro Farregiani claimed remuneration for "bleedings in various ways, clysters almost daily; fomentations, vesicants, mortifications and everything else that was needed".

Physicians and surgeons were entitled to be paid extra for the distance travelled to see the patient. In fact we come across such specifications as "from the city to Floriana" or "two consultations one of which in Birkirkara" or "twice daily outside the city" or "three months from morning to night at Attard" (1758).

Some medical practitioners like Dr. Gaetano Azzopardi, made use of their own carriage (the *calesse*) to visit patients and then claimed an extra sum to cover the travelling expenses. In other instances transport was provided and paid for by the patient himself. In fact it is on record that in 1767 a certain Angela Gatt submitted a bill of 6 *scudi* and 10 *tari* for the hire of *calessi* for the conveyance of the doctors and the surgeons who attended on Commandeur de Cloyach during his "long illness" (*Arch.* 676d).

Occasionally the physician hints that he was forced to visit a sick knight and to stay with him even though he had to abandon all his other patients. Thus Dr. E. Maggi stated that he was "obliged by superior orders to leave his own patients" to visit the Ven. Bali of Chambray in Gozo, while Dr. Giovanni Bruno wrote that he had to attend to the Ven. Bali de Bocage "at eight o'clock at night with serious inconvenience and was detained by him for more than an hour in accordance with the command of the said Bali".

In some instances the practitioner even stayed the night with the patient sleeping at his house to be at his beck and call. Thus the pharmacist Giacomo Gatt presented a bill of *scudi* 124 in June 1756 for the drugs supplied to the Ven. Bali de Chambray and also for "the assiduous assistance given him for a term of twenty-four days visiting him seven or eight times a day besides sleeping on the premises for eight days". Surgeon Domenico Pace had slept for twelve nights in the mansion of Com. Fra Baldassare Torres. Surgeon Claudio Camilleri, in December 1758, while treating Bishop Fra Paolo Alpheran stayed at the Bishop's Palace at Mdina "during the course of the illness, both by day and by night, without leaving the Palace during all this time" while Dr. Salvatore Bernard, who was treating the same personage, had to live at the Palace for seven whole days to minister to his needs by day and by night . . . having abandoned his private patients to whom he found it impossible to attend"

The *quantum* of the fees due to physicians and surgeons is not recorded in their requests for the settlement of their accounts. We know, however, that the legal code of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena of 1724 fixed a rate of one *tari* for a day visit and four *tari* for a night call, the fees to be collected at the end of treatment (Cassar, 1965a). There was only one instance where a surgeon stated his fee — "an *honorarium* of one hundred *scudi* and another hundred *scudi* by way of gratification" (Arch. 677c).

The pharmacist, on the other hand, always declared the sum due to him for drugs supplied to the patient, occasionally also specifying them such as "three gallons of orange flowers water" (1761). To ensure that his fees should be forthcoming, the pharmacist sometimes made it a point to obtain a written declaration from the patient testifying to the medicaments bought and also took care to retain the prescriptions which had to bear the name of the patient, the date and the signature of the prescribing physician to constitute a valid proof, in a court of law, that the medicaments were actually sold to the patient. This was in accordance with the provision contained in the *Dritto municipale*

*di Malta*, the body of laws prevailing in Malta at the time (*Dritto municipale di Malta*, 1843). The same legal code laid down that the assessment of the doctor's fees and the price of medicaments supplied by pharmacists pertained to the *protomedico* and that payment was to be made at the end of treatment (Arch. 652)

Although the eighteenth century practitioner treated poor patients gratis he did not hesitate to charge a fee to highly placed personages even when these happened to be a grand master or a bishop. In 1769 Dr. Gaetano Azzopardi requested payment for treating Mgr. Bishop Bartolomeo Rull during "the course of four years and three months". Dr. Gaetano Azzopardi and the barber-surgeon Francesco Mamo did the same while the pharmacist Giacomo Gatt submitted his bill of 234 *scudi* for medicaments supplied by him (Arch. 676e).

When Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto died in 1773 his medical attendants Drs. Gio. Domenico Biagio, Gaetano Azzopardi, Gaetano Azzopardino and Michel'Angelo Grima asked for their *honoraria* (Arch. 676f). In 1776 it was the turn of the physicians Giorgio Imbert, Gaetano Azzopardi, Gio. Domenico Biagio, Antonio Cren, Surgeon Antonio Cabany and phlebotomist Giorgio Tonna to claim remuneration for treating Grand Master Francesco Ximenes during his last illness (Arch. 676g).

Apart from visits, doctors sometimes performed other services which entitled them to some reward. Dr. Giuseppe Demarco, in 1767, asked for the sum of 231 *scudi* 3 *tari* and 9 *grani* to meet the expenses incurred by him for the publication of "a medical work" dedicated to the Ven. Bali Joseph de Duenas the cost of which this knight had promised to defray (Arch. 676h). The book referred to is entitled *De Lana* published in Malta in 1759.

Requests for payments for writing case histories also figure in the *Minutario*. On the 2nd April 1770 Dr. Biagio Consoli asked to be paid for "an extensive report in writing to be sent abroad" describing the illness of his patient (Arch. 676i). Dr. Lorenzo Thei made a similar submission on the 12th July of the same year for "three reports in writing sent to Naples" (Arch. 676j).

In 1758 Dr. P.P. Azzopardi claimed remuneration "for assistance rendered in the embalming of the cadaver" of Mgr. Bishop Fra Paolo Alpheran (*Arch.* 675). In 1769 the physician and surgeon Michel'Angelo Grima asked for "the usual honorarium and all the customary allowances that are given to the *maestro d'anatomia* for the embalming of the corpse" of Mgr. Bishop D. Bartolomeo Rull (*Arch.* 676k).

In October 1776 the surgeon Antonio Cabany applied for "the usual honoraria for himself and for five of his colleagues for the embalming of the corpse of Grand Master Francesco Ximenes as had been done on the occasions of the deaths" of Grand Masters Antonio Zondadari, An. Manoel de Vilhena and Raimondo Despuig. Apart from his fees, Cabany also received "a quantity of clothes" so much so that when Dr. Michel'Angelo Grima came to know of this he asked "to be granted all the clothing which he had soiled during the embalming of Bishop Rull" or its value in money (*Arch.* 676l). In 1797 surgeon Aurelio Badatt claimed payment for embalming the last grand master to die in Malta — Emmanuel Marie de Rohan (*Arch.* 677d).

There is evidence that the practitioner's demands for his fees were not always settled promptly and to his satisfaction. Thus in 1775 the surgeon Domenico Pace was only paid 5 *scudi* for "fifty-two days of attendance" (*Arch.* 676m). In the following year Dr. Gaetano Azzopardi demanded the sum of 75 *scudi* which had not yet been paid for services rendered over a period of six months. He was also asking for "some special remuneration for visiting the patient — Ven. Bali de Tencin — at Casal Lia over a period of thirty-six days" (*Arch.* 676n). In 1767 Dr. Giuseppe Demarco repeatedly complained that for 631 calls, two consultations, three night visits and a night spent at the patient's residence (Commandeur de Cloyach) he only received one instalment of 25 *scudi* "for so much labour" (*Arch.* 676o). In the same year Dr. Giuseppe Bigeni applied to the *Camera dei conti* for some kind of compensation from the *spoglio* of the Bali Fra Lucio Crescimanni. He had not only treated this knight during the previous five years but also all his domestic staff without ever getting any

reward. (*Arch.* 676p).

In 1798 surgeon Stanislao Sammut applied to the *Commissari degli spogli* to remove to their office all the furniture and other effects of the late Commandeur Romagnoli to ensure the payment of the fees due to him. (*Arch.* 677e).

Apart from the difficulty in recovering their fees, medical practitioners complained about the inadequacy of the standard fees which did not correspond to the value of the services rendered; so much so that on the 2nd April 1770 they submitted a plea "for an increase in their remuneration for the treatment given to the Ven. Grand Crosses, Knights and other members of the Sacred Religion, in accordance with the nature of their services and in proportion to the high cost of living of the time". Their demand was only partially acceded to, the *Camera dei conti* agreeing "to provide in extraordinary cases and (in the case of visits) to (members living) in the countryside" (*Arch.* 676q).

#### Comment

The three manuscripts surveyed above throw light on the relations of practitioners with their wealthy and aristocratic patients. They also give an insight into the social scene of eighteenth century Malta as it affected the financial side of medical practice and provide us with the names of the "successful" medical men and pharmacists of the time who had reached the front line of their profession from 1750 to 1798 — the last year of the Order's domination over Malta (Appendix).

These past colleagues, while offering their services free to the sick poor, lived in a "strictly business" age when it was accepted that a medical practitioner was fully entitled to make a living from his profession so much so that, as we have already seen, not even bishops and grand masters were exempt from the onus of paying for treatment received. The settling of accounts, however, at the patient's demise had serious drawbacks especially if the patient suffered from an illness of long duration which meant that the medical man had to wait many months and perhaps even years before he received his fees.

We come across only one incidental reference to the performance of an operation but we are left in the dark as to its nature and outcome. Although some forms of minor surgical procedures are specified (such as bleedings, cupping, etc.), no mention is made of the therapeutic measures used by physicians.

We do not know how opulent these "fashionable" medical men became for the manuscripts examined are silent on this point but other documents leave no doubt that some of these practitioners did not derive sufficient material rewards from their profession to ensure their economic survival after their retirement from practice. It is on record that at least two of them were so penurious in their last years of life that they were in debt. Thus in 1791 Dr. G. Locano and surgeon Michele Grillet declared that they did not have the means to pay their rent which they owed to the government treasury (Cassar, 1965b).

The passage of two centuries has brought some notable changes in the structure of the medical hierarchy. The physician, the surgeon and the pharmacist remain but the *barberotto*, *prattico*, *maestro di fisica* and *cavasanguie* have disappeared from the professional stage. There are two aspects, however, which retain a modern ring:- (a) most of the physicians and surgeons who attended members of high rank in the Order had gained prestige on account of their appointment to the staff of the Holy Infirmary; in our own days, too, ambitious medical men who aspire to achieve pre-eminence as leaders of the profession and to boost their private practice realize the importance of occupying a post on the staff of the main hospital of the Island; and (b) the grievance that our medical charges do not always represent a reasonable remuneration for services rendered and that fees tend to lag behind an ever increasing cost of living is but a perennial echo from the past.

## APPENDIX

### Chronological list of Physicians, Surgeons, Pharmacists and Medical Auxiliaries who attended sick knights between 1750 and 1798.

#### Physicians

1 Giuseppe Parnis	1746-1753
2 Vittorio Grech	1750-1751
3 Enrico Maggi	1750-1759
4 Pietro Paolo Azzopardi	1750-1756
5 Carlo Perdon	1750-1778
6 Giorgio Imbert	1751-1778
7 Giovanni Bruno	1751-1761
8 Gio. Domenico Biaggio	1752-1779
9 Giuseppe Vella	1752
10 Antonio Creni (Creni)	1755-1780
11 Salvatore Bernard	1759-1766
12 Gio Batta Borgia	1758
13 Gaetano Azzopardi	1758-1780
14 Gio. Basilio Zammit	1760
15 Giorgio Locano	1761
16 Filippo Zammit	1761
17 Lorenzo Thei	1762-1798
18 Giacomo Bruno	1763
19 Filiberto Gatt	1764
20 Giuseppe Bigeni	1764-1769
21 Michel'Angelo Grima	1765-1794
22 Giuseppe Demarco	1767-1778
23 Salvatore Vella	1768
24 Gaetano Azzopardino	1770-1775
25 Marc'Antonio Mallia	1771
26 Pietro Famuncelli	1774
27 Vincenzo La Rosa	1775-1777
28 Andrea Seychel	1775-1780
29 Giuseppe Aquilina	1775
30 Leopoldo Bernard	1777
31 Giuseppe Maria Grech	1780-1797
32 Giovanni Agius	1794-1796
33 Ludovico Abela	1794
34 Gaetano Pisani	1794
35 Francesco Borg	1794
36 Francesco Dimech	1795
37 Giuseppe Ciaja	1795
38 Gaetano Saydon	1795
39 Francesco Gravagna	1797

#### Surgeons

1 Giuseppe Calleja	1750
2 Domenico Pace	1751-1780
3 Gio. Batta Lhoste	1751
4 Onorato Auduard	1752-1767

5	Vincenzo Checcoli	1753	17	Giuseppe Felici	1761
6	Fabrizio Gauci	1753	18	Vincenzo Farrugia	1761
7	Antonio Brincat	1755	19	Fra Luciano Luppina	1762
8	Giuseppe Reboul	1756	20	Emanuele Fenech	1763
9	Aloisio Rapinett	1756-1767	21	Gio. Francesco Magri	1765-1780
10	Claudio Camilleri	1758	22	Gioacchino Delicata	1765-1779
11	Sigismondo Cousin	1759	23	Michel'Angelo Agius	1765-1778
12	Antonio Farrugia	1759	24	Giovanni Pace	1766
13	Felice Camilleri	1759-1767	25	Paolo Zammit (also a barber- surgeon)	1771-1777
14	Giorgio Tonna	1759-1793	26	Antonio Zammit	1772
15	Michele Grillet	1759-1779	27	Antonio Gatt	1772-1797
16	Paolo Celestri	1760	28	Pietro Balzan	1774
17	Francesco Mamo	1761-1794	29	Fortunato Vella	1775-1780
18	Francesco Grech	1762-1775	30	Aloisio Gatt	1777-1780
19	Michel'Angelo Magri	1763-1776	31	Gaetano Salvaloco	1777
20	Giuseppe Farrugia	1764-1771	32	Vincenzo Camilleri	1793
21	Gaetano Zarb	1765	33	Gio. Maria Grech	1794-1797
22	Giuseppe Micallef	1765-1775	34	Ignazio Apap	1794
23	Andrea Cousin (Cousi)	1767-1775			
24	Fedele Sammut	1767			
25	Alessandro Faregiani	1768			
26	Giorgio Teuma	1769			
27	Lorenzo La Speranza	1769			
28	Antonio Cabany (Cabani)	1770-1779			
29	Giovanni Andreotti	1794			
30	Felice Debono	1794			
31	Antonio Abela	1794			
32	Salvatore Micallef	1794			
33	Angelo Ventura	1794			
34	Giuseppe Speranza	1796			
35	Giovanni Briffa	1797			
36	Aurelio Badatt	1797			
37	Stefano Borg	1798			
38	Stanislao Sammut	1798			

### Pharmacists

1	Agostino Graner	1745-1750
2	Giacomo Gatt	1745-1769
3	Filiberto Gatt	1750 (already dead)
4	Andrea Farrugia	1750
5	Antonio Zahra	1750-1760
6	Agostino Schembri	1751-1759
7	Salvatore Cutajar	1751-1765
8	Francesco Mallia	1751-1754
9	Giuseppe Navarro	1752
10	Guglielmo Buhagiar	1753
11	Giuseppe Alfano	1758
12	Gaetano Mallia	1758-1797
13	? Piott	1758
14	Alessandro Farregiani (sic)	1758
15	Giacomo Zerafa	1759
16	Vincenzo Belan	1759-1779

### Barber Surgeons

1	Antonio Farrugia	1765
2	Carlo Zammit	1765
3	Fedele Sammut	1767-1775
4	Francesco Mamo (referred to also as surgeon)	1768-1773
5	Paolo Zammit (he was also a pharmacist)	1771
6	Domenico Pace (referred to as surgeon)	1772-1774
7	Gaetano Sammut	1772
8	Antonio Delicata (referred to also as Physic Master)	1774-1779
9	Giorgio Tonna (referred to also as surgeon)	1774
10	Michele Pimpinella	1778
11	Giuseppe Grech	1794

### Assistant Surgeons

1	Giuseppe Falzon	1766
2	Giuseppe Mallia	1794

### Physic Masters

1	Michele Farrugia	1751-1762
2	Antonio Delicata (referred to also as barber surgeon)	1795-1796

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