

A Short Note on the History of Medicine in Malta.

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The University of Malta was founded by the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. Thirty years after Grand Master La Vallette had founded the City that bears his name, the Jesuit fathers offered to build a College and a Church in Valletta. This offer was accepted and work was started on the 4th of September 1595. The building was completed in 1602. Twelve Jesuit fathers held public courses in Philosophy and Theology, and the degrees of Master of Philosophy and of Doctor of Divinity were conferred on successful scholars.

In 1574, the Order started building the Holy Infirmary also in Valletta, and every now and then improvements were added to the original plan, so that by 1662 the length of what was called The Great Ward was over 500 feet. A laundry and linen store were erected nearby.

In 1769, the Jesuits were expelled from the Island and their colleges and property were, by authority of the Holy See transferred to the Government of the Knights. In the same year a Bull by Pope Clement XIV, dated 20th October, confirmed the foundation of the new university. Three faculties were established: Theology, Law and Medicine.

During this period, the Holy Infirmary was one of the leading hospitals in Europe, and our knowledge of the medical work being performed here was limited to traumatic surgery. This bias in favour of wound-surgery is understandable if we bear in mind that the Order of St. John was constantly engaged in naval warfare against the Moslems. In assessing the nature and value of this work one must consider that European Surgery had not yet freed itself completely from Hippocratic or Medieval ideas. Progress had been made in anatomy in the famous Italian schools, but physiology and pathology were still in their infancy. Nothing was known about the origin and prevention of sepsis, and anaesthesia had not yet been dreamt of.

At this period a pioneer in surgery appeared on the scene, by the name of Michelangelo Grima. He spent his early years of training at the Holy Infirmary and thence went to specialise in Florence and Paris. In 1740 he was appointed Chief Dissector in the Royal Hospital of Sta. Maria Maggiore in Florence, and eight years later Master of Anatomy in the hospital in Messina. In 1761-62 he worked as Military Surgeon in Germany during the 7-year war. During this year he learnt the damaging effects of exposure to cold and of the long journeys in jolting carriages, especially in the case of head injuries.

In 1763 he returned to Malta and was immediately

appointed Chief Surgeon and Anatomist at the Holy Infirmary. He died in 1798 and was buried in the Franciscan Church in Valletta. Some of his Works include:

- a. *Traumatic Medicine*
- b. *On the Injuries of the Spleen.*
- c. *On Popliteal Aneurysms.*
- d. *On a New and Certain Method of Suturing the Intestines.*

A few months after the death of Grima, the Order was expelled from Malta by Napoleon and the educational and cultural life of Malta was disrupted. The new masters abolished the university, and the Holy Infirmary was taken over by the French for their troops. However, in 1800 the first British Royal Commissioner re-established the University, and medical studies re-started. Recognition of local Degrees was accorded on the turn of the century, and a happy association with British Universities began. So much so that although, up to a hundred years ago, the physician was accorded the imposing title of *Excellent Doctor* or *Magnificus Doctor*, his humbler brother, the surgeon, followed the English tradition and was simply called *Mister*.

Malta was becoming a prosperous centre of commerce and a gateway to the East, but also a target to infectious diseases like plague, smallpox and cholera. The quarantine regulations were very strict and annoyed many prominent visitors, and up to the year 1900 letters coming from effected countries were still being disinfected at our Lazzaretto.

The next milestone in our medical history was the discovery of the *Micrococcus* causing Undulant Fever.

The earliest reference to this illness in Malta is to be found, most probably, in an account of the Island written in the late 16th century by Giovanni Battista Leoni. Leoni was an ecclesiastic from Venice who accompanied Mgr Visconti on his visit to Malta in 1581 to inquire into the causes of the internal dissensions that were agitating the Order. Some time after his arrival in Malta, Mgr Visconti contracted a grave and prolonged fever which had *certain capricious intermissions* by which one was never sure whether he had recovered or was still sick, and which the doctors called *erratic fever*.

Leoni further informs us that the fever was accompanied by an *uncomfortable obstruction of the spleen*, apparently an allusion to the enlargement of this organ and to the pain and tenderness produced by the perisplenitis which is also of common

occurrence.

For almost 300 years this type of fever continued to prevail undifferentiated from other *intermittent* or *remittent* fevers until the second half of the 19th century when its protracted course and disabling effects among the British troops began to engage the attentions of the military authorities.

The microbe causing the disease was discovered by Surgeon-Major (later Sir) David Bruce while he was working at the Station Hospital in Valletta in December 1886. He found the micrococcus in the spleen of 5 fatal cases of Undulant Fever. A few months later in conjunction with the Maltese Dr. Caruana Scicluna, he cultivated the organism on Agar-Agar.

Recognition of the disease was made easier in May 1899 when another Maltese, Dr. (later Sir) Themistocles Zammit applied Widal's Method to the serum diagnosis of the fever and demonstrated the microscopic coagulation of the Bruce Micrococcus when treated by the blood serum taken from a patient suffering from the disease.

The prevention of the illness, however, still remained a grave problem for, as long as the source of the micrococcus was unknown, no prophylactic measures could be devised.

In June 18, 1905, Zammit discovered the organism in the blood of the goat. The work of the commission set up by the Royal Society, at the request of the Armed Forces worked very hard from 1904 to 1906.

Zammit's discovery was soon confirmed by an unpremeditated experiment on human beings. In the summer of 1905, Mr. Thompson of the U.S. Bureau of Animal Industry obtained a herd of 65 goats from Malta and shipped them to America via Antwerp on

the S.S. Joshua Nicholson. During the voyage many of the ship company drank freely of the goats' milk. On arrival at Antwerp the goats were re-embarked on the S.S. St. Andrew and again, during the passage to New York, a larger quantity of milk was consumed by the crew. Bacteriological examination of the milk of several of the goats that reached America resulted in the recovery of the micrococcus.

Exceedingly satisfactory results were obtained by pasteurisation. In the following months the Garrison also changed over from goat's milk to condensed milk. Someone, very wittingly, remarked that a tin-opener saved the British Army from extinction.

During the two World Wars, Malta was the Nurse of the Mediterranean, although during the last War the Island was a battered Nurse taking a very active part in the battle against the enemies of Democracy, and paying heavily for doing so.

In the medical field we are doing our best to carry on the good work at St. Luke's Hospital as did the Knights at the Holy Infirmary, because, like Osler

*We have loved no darkness
Sophisticated no truth
Nursed no delusions
Allowed no fear.*

References

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