

Infectious Diseases During the First World War in Gozo

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Introduction

Laws and regulations against the spread of infectious diseases have been with us since the time of the Knights of Malta. In modern times the main law is the Ordinance of 1908, Chapter 36, which continues to be updated till this very day. These regulations were in full force during various epidemics. There was the Spanish flu in 1918 which killed more people than the Great War. In Gozo 2539 people were reported to have been affected and 81 of them died. Other epidemics during the Great War period included a typhoid epidemic which occurred a couple of years before the flu epidemic and a small epidemic of malarial fever which was imported from Salonika. These were hard times for Gozo and medicine was not yet prepared to deal with these dangerous and serious illnesses.

The knowledge that germs cause disease and that communicable diseases spread from person to person, only became known in the twentieth

century. In 1884 Robert Koch (1843-1910) discovered the bacillus that caused cholera. He also found the bacillus which was causing tuberculosis (1882). His students and other doctors used his methods to find the germs that caused typhoid, whooping cough, tetanus, meningitis, leprosy, syphilis and others. A few years earlier the invention of the microscope, by Robert Hooke (1635 - 1703) together with Antonini van Leeuwenhoek in Holland, helped scientists and other doctors to discover the cause of more diseases.

Old Burial Customs

During the time of the Knights of Malta people who died of contagious diseases were buried in Lazzaretto cemetery after they were examined by the Protomedicus (Savona Ventura, 2005: 20). Burial in churches lasted till the end of the 18th century and burial in public cemeteries came into existence through the Ordinance of Burial of 10 May, 1869. The first burial outside the church was



The Lazzaretto on Manoel Island
(Source: <http://www.timesofmalta.com> - Nov 2012)

in January 1872, and by 1922 there were already 113,586 people buried in public cemeteries (Savona Ventura, 2005: 20). This ordinance limited burial under the church parvis to bishops and other high ranking priests only. Burial in churches stopped completely in 1918 when the Church's own Canon Law stated that burial in churches was allowed only for the Pope, cardinals, members of royal families and the bishop of the area. All other burials were done on the parvis outside and under the supervision of the Inspector of Public Health and a police officer, after the deceased had been left lying in his or her coffin for twenty-four hours (Bonnici, 1988: 389).

In 1872 the question arose as to whether persons, who had died due to communicable diseases, could be taken to church for the funeral function. The health authorities were against it and did not give permission for such church functions during the hot summer months when there was a suspicion that the deceased had died from a contagious disease such as cholera, measles, scarlet fever or other infections.

The custom of burying a person twenty-four hours after he or she had been declared dead came about due to the fact that there were cases when people had been buried alive. The coffin was left inside the church and the undertaker had to sleep in the church with the deceased (Grima, 1995). This rule applied to people who died natural deaths and still applies till the present day. In order to bury a deceased person before twenty-four hours had elapsed, there had to be a medical reason or a public health concern. Those who died a sudden death had to be kept for forty-eight hours before the coffin was closed for burial. Only if there were clear signs of decay were they allowed to bury the dead before twenty-four hours had elapsed.

New Regulations

In 1908 new regulations were issued to protect humans and animals from certain diseases and

to prevent the entry of and spread of infectious, contagious and epidemic diseases.¹ These regulations still apply today although amended from time to time. Under Chapter 36 of this Ordinance any practicing doctor, who was aware of people living at home who were suffering from infectious, contagious or epidemic diseases, had to notify the district medical officer. Any doctor who had a sick person under his care, or who had been called to see a sick person, had to immediately, upon becoming aware that the patient had a disease falling under this section of the Ordinance, submit to the Superintendent of Health, a certificate with the name, address and age of the patient, and the disease that the doctor suspected or thought the patient had.² The doctor was required to give notice of each. If he failed to give such notice he would be found guilty of an offense.

The Ordinance stated that in the case of any notification, a doctor was paid a fee of not less than nine and not more than twenty cents; fifty-eight cents in the case of a private physician, and a fee of not less than twelve cents and not exceeding twenty cents in the case of a doctor who was employed with the government. This small remuneration was meant to be an incentive for doctors not to fail in their duties. The diseases that fell under this Ordinance were: plague, smallpox, cholera, diphtheria, croup membrane, typhoid, yellow fever, leprosy and epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis, scarlet fever, typhoid or enteric fever, malarial fever, undulant fever, post-puerperal fever, and diseases known by the name of measles, erysipelas, smallpox, influenza, trachoma, pertussis, varicella, rabies, tuberculosis and other diseases that would appear from time to time but not included in this list.

It is worth mentioning that in 1937 at Fort Chambray the first Leprosarium was opened in Gozo where patients afflicted with the disease of leprosy were treated (Cassar, 1964). Patients who were ill with tuberculosis were kept in the Hospital

¹ Ordinanza Dwar it-Tharis mill-Mard, Kapitolu 36 tal-10 ta' Awwissu, 1908, kif emendata bl-Ordinanza XVIII tal-1992 u bl-Avviz Legali 407 tal-2007.

² Register of Infectious Diseases, Two Volumes, Public Health Office, Victoria Gozo, by permission of Principal Health Inspector Mr Joseph Borg.



Fort Chambray
(Source: <http://www.maltaramc.com> - Nov 2012)

of Santa Tereza at tal-Ibraġ near the Gozo General Hospital where today there is the mental hospital. The Hospital of Santa Tereza was opened in 1933 (Cassar, 1964). In the years after the First World War the most common diseases were smallpox, the trachoma, leprosy and tuberculosis.

When a notification was registered, the Medical Superintendent or his delegate had the right to inspect the residence of the reported person. They also had the power to have the patient undergo certain tests and medical examinations and to take the necessary treatment. If there was any danger that the disease could spread, the Superintendent had the power to order the isolation of that person to a specially designated place as advised by the Health Authorities. The Superintendent also had the duty to order the cleaning and disinfection of the house.

This ordinance also specified what had to be done in the cases where suspected patients died. The law required that the corpse be taken directly to the cemetery without being allowed a funeral service at the church and be buried not later than twenty-four hours after death. This was thought to prevent the spreading of the disease. Today, this part of the law has been amended as we know that when a person

dies, the body is no longer contagious although certain sanitary conditions are still observed. This part of the law was mainly in force when there was an epidemic of plague or cholera. Today most contagious diseases have been eliminated because of the routine use of vaccinations which are mandatory and also fall under this law. In Western countries hygiene has improved and also the level of health care and standard of living, so much so that we get very few cases of plague, polio, diphtheria, smallpox and other contagious diseases which are mentioned in the Ordinance.

Epidemics in Gozo

In spite of the laws to protect the public from the spread of diseases being in place for over a hundred years, not all cases of contagious diseases were, or in fact are, reported to the authorities. This has always been so and unfortunately still happens today. Therefore any figures being quoted may be somewhat conservative and reflect only those cases which were reported.

Looking to see what kind of diseases were reported in Gozo at the beginning of the last century, we find that in the year 1916 between August and

December there was a typhoid epidemic. Patients suffering from this affliction had severe fever and diarrhea. In this period a 145 cases were reported, nine of whom died. In Nadur alone twenty-two cases were reported three of which were fatal; a girl of eight, a boy of twelve and woman of thirty.

In the following year, between January and May, there was a measles epidemic. 750 cases were reported from all over the island. The first cases began in the village of Sannat, spreading to Xewkija and Xaghra and then to the west of Gozo to Għarb and San Lawrenz followed by new cases found once again in Xaghra. In the Nadur, Għajnsielem and Qala area there were only twenty-two cases reported by the end of March. This disease affected young children and during this epidemic forty-one people died.

Between November 1913 and December 1917 there was only one case of plague or cholera on the island. This was a man of thirty-five who died in Victoria Hospital on 30th March 1917. Other communicable diseases reported during this period included two cases of tuberculosis, one case of post puerperal fever and a case of Mediterranean fever, but there were no deaths from these infections.

In the first six months of 1918, there was an epidemic of whooping cough which affected mostly children and babies. Overall, 784 cases were reported of which forty-three people died, the majority being infants under one year old. This epidemic began in the Nadur, Qala and Għajnsielem area. Dr Ġużi Attard, the Medical Officer of the district, reported 147 cases during the month of February alone. The infection started in Għajnsielem and then spread to the Nadur and Qala area. In Nadur there were 202 cases of whooping cough and five of the afflicted died. In the summer of 1918, two brothers from Nadur, one aged twenty-four and the other twenty-seven, were reported as having tuberculosis. Both of them died.

Fever from Malaria

In May of 1918 it was reported by Dr. Alfred Cauchi, that there were fourteen cases of fever caused by malaria. Symptoms of malaria include

headache, fatigue, fever and great chills. What is interesting is that these cases of malaria must have been imported from other countries as this disease does not exist in Malta. None of those who bore the symptoms died due to this infection and all the cases were found in Victoria. The period under scrutiny was during a war and therefore one can only imagine that malaria could have been imported from any country involved in the war, where this disease was endemic, by some soldiers who visited these places and then came to Gozo.

Although Malta and Gozo did not participate directly in World War I, they still welcomed several wounded soldiers who were fighting in Gallipoli and Salonika. Additionally about one thousand Maltese and Gozitans took part in the war with the British fleet. Among these soldiers was a certain Sergeant Major Francis Mejlaq from Nadur who served for four years in Alexandria from 1914 (Said, 2003: 27). It appeared that this man was not afflicted with any infectious illness but another man, also from Nadur, aged twenty was reported on 21st December 1918 to be suffering from malarial fever. Seven other cases all from Xewkija, were reported together on 11th April 1919 who probably contracted the disease when they were in Salonika. Another man from Nadur who actively participated in the First World War was Francois Camilleri. He was engaged as a private in the Royal Army Service Corps. He was severely wounded in his leg when they were fighting in France. From there he was taken to a military hospital in Cambridge, England, where he was found to have tetanus and died from it on Thursday, 14th November 1918, just two days after the armistice, at the age of twenty-one (Camilleri, 2007: 28).

The Spanish Influenza

The most notorious episode of 1918, apart from the end of the war, was the great epidemic of the type of influenza known by the code A H1N1, or as it is more popularly known, the Spanish Flu. This influenza killed more than forty million people, which is a number greater than the number of people killed in the Great War.



The casualties from operations in Gallipoli (25 Apr 1915 – 9 Jan 1916), and Salonika (Oct 1915 – 30 Sept 1918), were initially treated at Malta and Egypt.
(Source: <http://www.maltaramc.com> - Nov 2012)

The Outbreak of the Spanish Flu in Gozo

In Gozo this influenza had a great effect on the life of the people, as it caused disruption of work, education and social life, although not as much as in Malta. The epidemic lasted for almost nine months so the consequences were felt all too well. During this epidemic, the schools were closed, children were not sent to religious lessons, and churches were not holding their usual functions for which many people used to gather (Bonnici, 1988: 210). In Gozo alone, 2539 cases were reported. The first cases were reported on the 17th September 1918, in Nadur and Victoria. The first death from this influenza was a man of thirty-six years old who died in Victoria Hospital on the 17th September 1918. The last cases reported were on the 11th June 1919. According to the census of

the 2nd April, 1911, the Gozitan population stood at 22,695.³ This means that 11.2 percent of the population was infected with this flu. Eighty-one people of those who were infected died.

As a precautionary measure, in order to reduce the spread of this epidemic, those who were afflicted with this infection were ordered to remain quarantined at home until the symptoms of the disease diminished. Sanitary inspectors were obliged to go and check if sick people left their homes. This measure was introduced as part of the regulations put in place in 1908 for the protection from diseases. Bishop Camilleri ordered the parishes not to sound bells which signaled that someone was dying. This was done so that the sick themselves would not have to bear the fear of hearing the bells pealing for death. This

³ National Archives, Gozo Public Library. *Censiment 2 ta' April 1911*. Malta: Malta Government Printing Office.

ban started on the 23rd May 1918, and lasted for six months (Bonnici, 1988: 210). Although it was widely known that people had been dying since May of 1918, the first cases of Spanish Flu began to be reported in September 1918. It may have been that at first physicians did not recognize the symptoms as belonging to the Spanish Flu. In Nadur alone there were 362 cases reported to have fallen ill with the flu, almost eleven percent of the population of Nadur at that time. Of these twelve died, nine of whom were under twenty years old. During this period the District Medical Officer for the area of Nadur, Ġhajnsielem and Qala was Dr Anthony Cremona, who was also responsible for Xagħra. The Archpriest of Nadur, Fr. Martin Camilleri, wrote in his diary in April 1919, that he was also affected by the Spanish Flu and had received the last rites (Muscat, 2002: 19).

Conclusion

Gozo went through a dreadful period of war, poverty, sickness and unemployment. As seen in this brief research, Gozo has always had rules and laws in place to protect its inhabitants from infectious diseases, since the time of the Knights of Malta. These regulations were still in use until the Ordinance of 1908 which continues to be amended till the present day. One hundred years ago, treatment was still limited and medicine had little to offer to the patient against infectious diseases. There were few vaccines against diseases and nor were there antibiotics against these germs. There was also a marked lack of cleanliness, as well as poverty and ignorance. Diseases spread easily due to lack of washing and hygiene and also because contaminated water was used for drinking.

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