

The Manuscript

Among the manuscript holdings of the National Library at Valletta there is one that reflects several aspects of the health conditions of Gozo in 1813-1815.

The ms. (Lib. 1432) consists of a note-book of 46 pages written on both sides of the page. The paper is so thin and the ink is so dark that at times the writing on the back shows through to the front rendering the text of variable legibility. The size of the notebook measures 21cm by 15cm.

The leaves are bound to form a booklet but the binding is not the original one. The front and back covers are of hardboard. There is no title-page, no author's name and no indication as to how the ms. was acquired by the Library and when.

The last page ends with an incomplete entry. The last complete note is dated 17 June 1815. The ms. breaks up at this point. It is not known if the ms. was continued in another book which might have long since been lost.

Contents

The manuscript consists of a collection, in chronological sequence, of the notes of certificates issued and signed by surgeon (*chirurgo*) Calcedonio Speranza as they were submitted to the Health Authorities and to the Law Courts of Gozo. They are recorded according to the date of examination of the patient; but to get a clear view of the nature of Speranza's professional practice I propose to consider his notes

according to the topic they deal with. For this purpose I have grouped them under the following headings:

- Death certificates and causes of mortality
- Medico-legal reports of injuries and post mortem examinations
- The plague of 1813-14
- The smallpox epidemic of 1813-14

Death Certificates

It appears that there was no standard official form of a death certificate issued by the health authorities at the beginning of the 19th century – at least none has so far been met with to my knowledge. Surgeon Speranza used a set form of wording beginning with the phrase *cessò di vivere* (ceased to live) or with the euphemistic expression that the patient passed “to eternal rest” or “from this life to a better one”. Then followed the name, age, locality and cause of death. Here are two specimens (translated from Italian):

- (a) “B.T. eighty years old, passed to eternal rest during the night in consequence of a lung disease and loss of blood. I have examined his body but found no signs of a contagious illness 23rd July 1814.”
- (b) “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 except the scars of smallpox. In truth thereof I sign my name by my own hand today the 30th July 1814.” The allusion to a “contagious illness” derives from the fact that at that time, besides smallpox, there was an epidemic of bubonic plague.

Causes of death/mortality

Convulsions in infants and children. Seven cases, one of which ascribed to dentition.

“Dysentery” in adults. Seven cases.

Erysipelas of right leg attributed to a prick from a scissors, made worse by neglect and bad treatment.

Epilepsy. One case in a man of sixty years who died in the Male Division of the General Hospital (*Ospedale dei maschi*). His certificate is the only one that bears the full signature of *Calcedonio Speranza. Incarrigato (sic)* (i.e. The practitioner in charge of the hospital. (9 June 1814).

Fever. Unspecified. Five cases.

Foetus born during a difficult labour. Two cases. One was delivered with the cord round the neck and died “after receiving baptism at home”; the other presented with prolapse of the right hand and died in spite of all “operations” (manual?) carried out. The mother survived.

Old age. Thirteen men and women whose ages varied from eighty to ninety eight years. In four of them, in addition to senility, there were also "hydropsy of the lungs", gangrene of the buttocks, "abscess of the neck" and "abscess in the right thigh".

Smallpox. Thirty-nine children. In a few instances small pox was complicated by "dysentery" or "obstruction of vital organs".

Spinal "tumour". A girl was born with a very large swelling filled with "lymph" situated over the lumbar vertebrae. As this tumour was a "penetrating" one (communicating internally?), in Speranza's view, the girl could in no way "escape death". He ascribed the origin of the tumour to a severe fall of the mother during pregnancy. (22 May 1814).

Syphilis (*lue*). On 5 January 1815 he certified that some two years previously he had seen Maria... for *lue confirmata* as shown by ulcers in the throat and articular pains. He treated her with mercurial inunctions.

Three months previously he had seen another case of *lue confirmata* - in a girl of three-and-a-half years "contracted from her parents". She presented with ulcers in her mouth and her privy parts. (24.9.1814).

Spleen. Two cases of "obstruction" of this organ accompanied with long standing "dysentery".

Tetanus. On the 10 September 1814, he saw a girl with wounds in her right index and middle fingers sustained in a fall. There was gangrene of the middle finger. Tetanus appeared on the ninth day.

The Plague of 1813-14

Bubonic plague invaded Malta between the 16th April and the

5th May 1813. It extinguished itself by the 7th March 1814. In the meanwhile, on the 18th February 1814 it appeared in Gozo at Xaghra to which village it remained confined. It carried off one hundred and four persons before it came to an end by the 13th June 1814.

Surgeon Speranza's first allusion to the plague is an indirect one. It occurs in a death certificate addressed to the *Protomedico* (Chief Government Medical Officer) on the 2nd May 1814. It runs as follows in a free translation from Italian then the language of professional and cultured persons in the Maltese Islands: "Giuseppe ... 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"; in fact he had no occasion to deal with plague cases during this epidemic but he continued to examine the corpses of his patients for plague until the 27th January 1815 long after the epidemic had ceased.

The Smallpox Epidemic

On the 1st September 1814, Speranza received the following instructions from the Acting *Protomedico* of Gozo, Dr Cutajar (freely translated from Italian): - "It is the precise wish of His Excellency (the Governor of Malta) that the *Protomedico* of Malta be kept informed of every illness occurring in the Island of Gozo. I, therefore, advise that you carry out this order with all exactitude i.e. to report to me in writing every person calling upon you to be treated so that I can keep informed the *Protomedico* of Malta of such occurrences".

There is no reason to believe that Speranza failed to abide by the instructions of Dr Cutajar; indeed he issued no less than thirty-nine reports of smallpox in children between the 8th July 1814 and the 16th June 1815.

Medico-legal reports

During the period of eighteen-and-a-half months covered by this manuscript, Speranza drew up a number of medico-legal reports and certificates at the behest of the judicial authorities of Gozo whom he addresses as *Signori Loro Illustrissimi* (Your Most Illustrious Sirs). The one written on the 16th December 1813 reads (translated from Italian):

"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".

On the 14th February 1814 he issued another report in conjunction with Dr...Arpa and Dr...Pace: "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."

The prisoner was seen some time later by the same medical examiners who recommended a "universal treatment", that is with mercurial preparations, as without such medication he would suffer such a deterioration in his health that "the medical profession would not be capable of offering any means for the total restoration of his health." It was recommended that the prisoner should be admitted to hospital where he would be in a position to benefit from the medical and surgical care available there. The prisoner was eventually transferred to hospital. By this time he was suffering from retention of urine. Speranza submitted to the Court that because of this condition, G.Z. needed to do some exercise, while in hospital, to ensure "the movements of his humours" as confinement to bed would result in great harm with aggravation of his illness" (9.4.1814).

On the 1st March 1814, Speranza was appointed by the Court to perform a post-mortem examination on the body of a murdered man admitted to hospital: "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 *pollici* (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."

On the 2nd February 1815, he was called to inspect the dead

body of a woman that had been found drowned in a well at Gharb. An external examination of the body revealed no signs of injuries, wounds or beatings. In his opinion death was due to obstruction of respiration from drowning due to her falling into the cistern.

Occasionally livestock that happened to be ailing came within his previews. On the 18th March 1814, he was assigned the task of a veterinary practitioner by the Law Court when he was ordered to assess the fitness for human consumption of an injured cow at Mount Ghelmus. He found the cow to be quite alert but on examining her he found that she had sustained a dislocation of her hip joints caused by skidding while running in a swift career across a grazing field. There was no other sign indicative of disease. He, therefore, certified that the cow was fit to be killed at the slaughterhouse and its meat sold to consumers without prejudice to the public health.

Certificate of Injuries for Court Purposes

The certificates of injuries issued by Calcedonio Speranza involved the following parts of the body:

Skull	26
Face & Neck	11
Fingers	10
Arms and Forearm	7
Vertebral Column (Lumbar Region)	6
Ribs	2
Abdomen	2
Breast (Woman)	1
Eye	1
	Total 66

The injuries were either contusions or lacero-contused wounds. There were no fractures and penetrating wounds. The injuries were all caused by blunt objects except in two instances produced by a cutting instrument; and in a solitary case, caused by two balls shot from an arquebus.

Of the total of 66 injuries only two were declared by Speranza to present a danger to life i.e. 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 only one instance he did not feel so sure about the outcome of the injury. On the 28th November 1814 he examined a patient with a contusion of the left iliac crest caused by a blunt instrument. He saw the patient again five days later following the development of fever and the onset of spasmodic abdominal pains. The only certificate that he issued this time stated that he was reserving his opinion to a later date. Unfortunately, there are no further allusions to this case and we are left wondering as to the final outcome of the patient's condition.

Certificates of "Cure"

Two certificates of healing relieve the somber aura of morbidity and mortality. On the 1st August 1814, Speranza wrote thus (translated from Italian); "I certify that about five years ago the wife of M.Z. was under my care for the French Disease (*morbo gallico*) for which she received a *cura universale* (i.e. a course of mercurial inunctions). Since then she has been enjoying perfect health".

Another certificate of the 7th February 1815 concerned a "head wound" sustained by G.P. and treated by Speranza ten years previously. Speranza had considered the wound to be dangerous to life but after treatment the patient "was perfectly cured" and able to resume his occupation.

Who was Calcedonio Speranza?

We know very little about him. Up to the present the records discovered about him are very scanty and he remains a very elusive

figure. He was a product of the eighteenth century when there was a distinct separation in the medical hierarchy between the physician and the surgeon. The former received an academic education, and spoke and wrote Latin. He obtained his medical doctorate from a medical school abroad, such as Salerno and Montpellier, and on his return to Malta he had to spend a number of years practising at the Holy Infirmary before he received his warrant to enter into private practice.

On the other hand, the surgeon underwent no such studies. He started his career at a very young age at the Holy Infirmary of Valletta as an apprentice. He followed lectures in anatomy and surgery and attended dissections and post mortem examinations at the same Infirmary. After approval, at the end of his training,

by the surgeons of the Infirmary, he would become a *barberotto* or barber-surgeon.

In fact Speranza started his career as a barber-surgeon in the Order's navy. He was then appointed barber-surgeon at the hospital at Gozo. He claimed that a paternal grandfather, an uncle and two brothers were surgeons. We then lose sight of him until 1786 when he addressed a petition to the Grand Master that he had a son, Giuliano, who desired to follow in the foot steps of his father as a barber-surgeon and aspired to be appointed in this capacity at the Gozo Hospital as successor to his father Calcedonio. The request was granted. The records stop there.

From other sources we know that there were other "Speranzas" engaged in the practice of the healing arts during the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries. Indeed they formed quite a dynasty but Calcedonio's relationship to them has not been yet ascertained.

Comment

The exceptional importance of Speranza's manuscript and its contents derives from the fact that (a) it depicts the epidemiological scene in Gozo in the first two decades of the nineteenth century; (b) it is the only notebook about a surgeon's practice that we know of; (c) it provides a first-hand record of the medico-legal aspects of trauma and death as presented to the Law Courts in Gozo between 1813 and 1815; (d) it is a reminder that the concept of specialisation in medicine and surgery had not yet dawned with the result that every practitioner was expected to be knowledgeable and competent in all branches of medical science.