

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

FROM OUR READERS

PROF. JOSEPH AZZOPARDI

MD MRCP FRCP(L) FRCP(G) FRCP(E) FEFIM(Hon)

Specialist in Internal Medicine, Diabetes and Endocrinology

Dear Editors,

I write to correct certain distortions of the truth contained in your article entitled "The Medical Strike 1977-1987 Revisited" in issue 3 of TheSynapse that I received on the 7th August 2018.

If what you wrote in your article is simply a reflection of what the author wrote in his book, then you should have made this clear. If on the other hand you make what the author wrote your own, as you seem to do, then you should have checked your facts before you published the article.

You state that the strike stemmed from the inadequate salary structure of Government doctors. This is not true. In fact, the disagreement had nothing to do with money. The causes of the dispute were:

1. The power of the Medical Council to grant medical warrants; this ensured standards and objectivity in assessing qualifications to practice in Malta. In 1977 the Government legislated, transferring this power to the Minister of Health, enabling the latter to grant warrants without independent screening. The Medical Association objected to this.
2. A shortage of house physicians at that time. The Government had reacted to this by passing a law forcing newly qualified doctors to serve for two years in Government hospitals immediately after qualifying on pain of permanent professional exile. The Association wanted a more humane way of dealing with the matter.

False Government propaganda at the time tried to cloud the issue by giving the impression that the dispute was over a proposed health scheme. This was not the case. I know what the issues were. I was on the Medical Association of Malta Committee at the time.

In your article you state that the Medical Association organised a general medical strike; this again is not true. In response to the above laws the Association ordered a limited action that guaranteed emergency services. This action had the approval and support of the World Medical Association and the British Medical Association. Again, false Government propaganda tried to create the impression

that the Medical Association had refused to provide for an emergency service.

Mintoff's Government savagely responded to the above limited trade union action by:

- Locking Government doctors obeying union directives out of state hospitals
- Barring these doctors from practising in private hospitals
- Dismissing these doctors from Government service with loss of pension rights

Not being able to make a living in Malta, the majority of Association doctors were effectively exiled, some never coming back. Many died abroad.

On the dismissal of Maltese doctors a number of foreign doctors were given a warrant by the Minister of Health to work in Malta. Many of these were not properly qualified. It was through the influx of these foreign mercenaries and the 'forty-five brand of brothers' you refer to in your article that the Government was able to lock out and dismiss specialists and doctors obeying their union. The result was a complete fracas of the medical service, with many patients paying with their health, some even with their lives.

As many of the dismissed Maltese doctors were University teachers, the local medical degree lost its international recognition. All qualifying doctors at the time were thus forced to remain working in Malta, thus 'solving' the above house physician issue. Many of the medical students went to finish their studies abroad, most never returning back.

The dispute was a trade union matter and had nothing to do with politics, as the author of the book implies. Any civilised Government would have resolved the matter through dialogue and negotiations.

I appreciate that people are entitled to different views on any topic. One must however distinguish between opinions, facts and untruths. In this regard, the statements in your article that the strike stemmed from an inadequate salary structure and that the Medical Association organised a general strike are examples of outright lies propagated by the government of the time.

I write this to clarify the truth and to set the record straight. ❌

EDITORIAL COMMENT

DR WILFRED GALEA

The 1977 – 1987 Doctors' strike was a painful chapter in Maltese Medical history which affected negatively all stakeholders: doctors who participated in the strike, doctors who remained in government employment and above all, patients.

The review of the book was written by the author from the author's point of view and the book complements other books by Dr Lino German and Prof. Charles Savona Ventura, which also dealt with the subject.

The strike also affected a cohort of medical students, myself included, who had to do their medical school years in Malta during the strike in a new and controversial 'student-worker' scheme and managed to graduate in spite of the system and many obstacles.

When these students graduated, they were looked down upon by some doctors who returned to Malta and were even labelled as 'gap doctors.'

I was fortunate enough to participate in the 'Family Medicine Faculty Training Programme' which was organised by the University of Toronto and University of Malta in 1988 but unfortunately this training programme was not repeated because of lack of support from the authorities at that time.

Fortunately, time is a great healer and there are colleagues from all generations who have consistently put aside all differences and continued to work for the benefit of the whole medical profession and patients in Malta. ❌

The discussion about this subject is now closed

