

Medicine in Malta

The St. Luke lecture delivered to the Malta Branch of the British Medical Association on St. Luke's day 1954.

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After expressing his appreciation and thanks for having been appointed the first St. Luke's lecturer and after a brief allusion to what is known about St. Luke and his connection with Malta the lecturer embarked on his main theme.

Medicine in Malta

What the practice of medicine in Malta was like at the time of the visit of St. Luke, we can only surmise, as no records have been discovered so far. The population of Malta, then, was small and its needs were limited. Very likely the Praetor or Proconsul brought with him in his suite, his private physician, usually a Greek slave or freedman; the local inhabitants might have had recourse to the priests of the temples, but most, bore their illness with stoical fortitude of which we see many instances even today.

In the middle ages, the cultures of classical Greece and Imperial Rome were submerged by the hordes of barbaric invaders that overran Europe, who regarded any occupation but soldiering as beneath them — only the monks, in the seclusion of their cloisters, were able to keep the torch of learning alight and to pass it on to later generations. It is to the monks that the sick and ailing went, seeking relief; and the monks, obedient to the teaching of the Master, did not send them away unrelieved and un comforted. Thus it came about that in the middle ages medical practice was mostly in the hands of the monks many of whom, from natural aptitude and long experience became efficient doctors.

The monks were compelled to set aside part of their monasteries or to build hostels to house the sick whilst they

were being treated, and this is the origin of the modern hospitals.

Thus the hospital of St. Bartholomew, that I look upon as my foster mother in the professional sense began as an annexe to the Augustinian friary of Smith field and it is possible that the Hospital of Santo Spirito in Rabat began as an annexe of the Franciscan Monastery which adjoins it.

After the Norman occupation and the annexation of Malta to the Spanish Empire, Malta returned to the West, monasteries were built and medical practice followed the trends prevailing in Europe. It was probably in the hands of a few immigrant doctors, of not a few quacks and of friendly neighbours who helped by their advice just as they still do in our day.

Under the Order of St. John

In 1530 the Emperor Charles V gave Malta to the Knights of St. John, an order founded originally to maintain and defend the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, and who even after their expulsion from the Holy Land still looked upon the erection and maintenance of hospitals as one of the main objectives of their Order.

The Knights under the Mastership of Villiers de l-Isle Adam arrived in Malta in October 1630 and as soon as they had settled down in the Borgo adjoining the Castle of St. Angelo they started building the Conventual Hospital. The foundation stone was laid, with due pomp and ceremony on the 1st November 1632. The building is still in existence as the Convent of Santa Scolastica. (Critien — The Borgo Holy

infirmary now Santa Scolastica Convent Malta 1950.)

After the Great Siege of 1565 Grand Master La Vallette founded the town of Valletta and a new Hospital was built on the South eastern corner, which became known as the Sacra Infermeria.

On this institution the Knights lavished their care and their wealth and nothing was spared to make the hospital worthy of the prestige of the Order. They took care that the doctors they employed had the best qualifications. Thus my first predecessor in the Chair of Surgery Michael Angiolo Grima had been sent to study in Florence and in Paris. The hospital acquired such a reputation that it attracted even foreigners to seek treatment there.

The professional Staff consisted of three Senior Physicians and three assistant physicians called "pratici" who each took a turn of duty of a month at a time. There were three surgeons and three assistants or "Pratici di chirurgia" who also did turns of duty of a month.

There was a barber surgeon and two assistants to carry out bloodletting and cupping and similar operations.

Women were not admitted to the Sacra Infermeria, so the order provided a free domiciliary medical service (Servizio delle povere inferme), by five salaried physicians distributed as follows: two for Valletta, one for Borgo, one for Isola and one for Bormla.

In addition, the sick poor were given free medicines, victuals, clothing bedding and, where necessary, an allowance in cash.

This service has been continued and expanded under British rule as the District Medical Service, to this very day.

The Medical School

The original Medical school was

founded under the Grand Mastership of Fr. Nicholas Cottoner in 1674, primarily with the object of training surgeons for service in the galleys; for at this time the navy of the Order was at the height of its power and fame. It was enlarged subsequently to provide a full medical curriculum. Before the school was established medical practice was conducted by immigrant doctors, a few who studied in Italian Universities and very probably by irregular practitioners. After the establishment of the Medical school, medical practice became regulated by laws and nobody was allowed to exercise the Medical Profession without a decree of the Grand Master and a licence from the "Protomedico" or Chief Medical Officer. These laws were codified in 1784 under De Rohan: in Chapter vi para. ii it is laid down that the Protomedico shall not give his license, whatever the qualifications of the candidate, unless the candidate had attended the Sacra Infermeria for six years in the case of physicians and for four years in the case of surgeons. There are other provisions regulating the practice of medicine and pharmacy which differ remarkably little from those in force in the present day.

In 1769 Grand Master Pinto founded the University and the medical school became incorporated in the medical faculty of the new University.

The Napoleonic Period

In 1798 Napoleon landed in Malta. The Order, torn by internal dissensions made no resistance and handed the Island to the French.

The French took over the Sacra Infermeria and turned it into a Military hospital for the use of the troops. The civilian patients had to be accommodated somewhere and some provision had to be made for the local inhabitants. The problem was solved by taking over the

convent of the Magdalene Nuns and the adjoining church of St. Magdalene which was desecrated for the purpose. These premises together with the hospital for women known as the Casetta became the civil hospital.

When the French were driven out, the Sacra Infermeria together with all the fortifications and other military effects of the Order passed into the hands of the British Government to whom the French had capitulated.

Under British rule the Sacra Infermeria continued to be the Garrison Hospital and the Civilian patres still continued to be treated in the "Casetta" and adjoining building which had been taken over from the Magdalene nuns.

The hospital of the "casetta" which had been used for destitute females and those suffering from incurable disease (it was also known as incurabili delle donne) never enjoyed a high reputation. When together with the Magdalene Convent and Church it became the main hospital conditions certainly were not improved, but so they remained until the year 1850.

In 1849 the Government finally realized that the Hospital was unsatisfactory and something had to be done. It was decided therefore to take over a building in Floriana, erected under G. M. de Vilhena as a school and orphanage for girls and use it as the Civil Hospital. The transfers actually took place in 1850. It was not an ideal arrangement but it was a great improvement on the previous one.

The Central Civil Hospital continued to be so used right up to the year 1951.

During this period, the latter half of the nineteenth century great progress had been made in the construction and management of hospitals and especially in nursing.

Malta lagged behind chiefly for the lack of a properly built hospital. The

old Central Civil Hospital was still run on a system very much like that of the old Sacra Infermeria.

Some progress was made when the Government of the day entered in an agreement with the Order of St. Vincent de Paul, who undertook to provide Sisters to supervise nursing in Government institutions; but the male attendants still continued to be called "Gwardiani" as they had been in the Sacra Infermeria, which seemed to imply that their main duty was to keep order and the female attendants were styled "servienti".

In the last decade of the last century a feeble attempt was made to give the "guardiani" and "servienti" many of whom were illiterate some sort of technical education. An instructor of nurses was appointed, who gave a course of lectures three times a week for nine months on elementary anatomy and Physiology with a smattering of Pathology.

In the meantime, outside Malta nursing had made a great stride and nursing as a profession had become well established.

Skilled nursing was introduced in Malta with the coming of the Little Company of Mary, known also as the Blue Sisters, in 1894. The Blue Sisters were skilled nurses and they began to nurse the sick in their own homes. The time soon came when it was the general feeling that all had not been sure for a dear sick person unless a Blue Sister had been called in. The Blue Sisters opened their private hospital in 1910 and in 1922 they set up a school of nursing on modern lines with a three year course as prescribed by the Nursing Council of England.

In 1936 the Government realised that nursing, especially in the Government Hospitals and institutions, had lagged far behind and decided to find a remedy. A nursing ordinance was enacted

(Ordinance VIII of 1936) which set up a register of nurses and set up standards for registration and a scheme for setting up a school of nursing was drawn up. However, the scheme was implemented only in part and that half heartedly and then abandoned. Then came the War. After Victory the scheme was revived and in February 1948 as Hon. Minister of Health I had the great pleasure and satisfaction of being present at the formal inauguration of the school by the Governor His Excellency Sir Francis Douglas and the blessing of the Nurses' Home by His Grace the Metropolitan Archbishop.

In 1948, the General Nursing Council of England gave full reciprocity to those who were registered in our Register of Nurses.

St. Luke's Hospital.

It had been realised for some time that the Central Civil Hospital, which its constructors had never intended for a hospital, was altogether inadequate and there was much talk of building a new modern hospital. In 1910 it was decided to use part of the Poor House at Nghieret as the Main General Hospital. Alterations had already been taken in hand when the scheme was abandoned. It was only during the brief interlude of Self-Government 1921-27, that the Government had the vision and the courage to lay the foundations of a modern hospital. Plans were drawn up, a site selected and work begun. The construction of the Hospital was almost complete when the 1939-45 war broke out. After the war work was resumed and the hospital was eventually completed, equipped and in full use in 1951.

The hospital was named St. Luke's in honour of our Patron Saint.

In St. Luke's our profession has a headquarters worthy of its history and traditions.

Other Hospitals

During the latter half of the XIX Century considerable progress was made in providing for certain classes of patients.

There was no special provision in the time of the order for those suffering from mental disease. Those who could not be kept at home were kept at the place provided for destitute and incurable cases known as the "Ospizio".

The present Mental Disease Hospital at H'Attard was opened in 1861 and the Poor House at Nghieret known as St. Vincent de Paul Hospital was opened in 1882 to replace the Ospizio.

Both are well planned, spacious and modern buildings and entirely adequate for the purpose for which they were erected. St. Vincent de Paul Hospital was severely damaged by bombs during the last war; its rebuilding is not complete yet.

The Connought Hospital for Tuberculosis is at present housed in a fine historic building at Mdina which used to be the Old Law Courts. The building would be ideal for a museum but as a hospital for tuberculosis it is most unsuitable. It was used as a military hospital but through the good offices of the Duke of Connought whilst he was Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean, it was handed over to the Civil Government and turned into a Hospital for Tuberculosis. It was formally opened by His Majesty King Edward VII on the 22 April 1909.

In Gozo there is a general hospital, known as the Victoria Hospital to which is annexed the Ospizio for aged incurables.

Public Health

The Government of the Order was fully alive to the importance of preventive measures which in those days chiefly consisted in avoiding infection by means of Quarantine.

Malta from its geographical position

in the centre of the Mediterranean and in the Days of Sail a stopping place between the East and West, was particularly prone to the introduction of epidemics. The Code de Rohan contains numerous enactments meant to prevent and control contagious Disease.

The extensive buildings of the Lazzaretto are a monument to the weight given by the knights to the control of Epidemic Diseases.

On the Public Health side, we in Malta have kept abreast of the progress made abroad and our health legislation is second to none. The reason probably is that the Crown Colony Government officials looked to England for their inspiration and in England Public Health legislation was and is far advanced.

Up to 1885 the police administered the Public Health laws as a branch of that Department. In the following year a separate independent Public Health Department was set up, and the Office of C.G.M.O. created. I am proud to recall that the first C.G.M.O. was professor S.L. Pisani another of my predecessors in the chair of surgery.

The Hospitals and District medical Service remained under the Control of the Department of Charitable Institutions, which was a direct successor of the "Commissionari di Carità" of the Government of the Order.

In 1937 it was decided to bring in all medical Activities under one Control. The Public Health Department was merged with the Department of Charitable institutions and became the Medical and Health Department. The purely charitable activities which, begun at the time of the Order, were kept up under British Rule now became the responsibility of the Department of Social Services.

This change which, at first sight appears to be rioting more than a mere administrative measure, has in fact a deep significance. It really indicates the

radical change of outlook brought about by the deep changes in the Social structure of peoples which have taken place in recent years.

The French, Russian and Spanish Revolutions have wiped out the last vestiges of Feudalism which had already been cleared out of England by the Roundheads.

The masses became conscious of their power, they have assumed Government and have asserted their rights amongst which is the right to health and freedom from disease. The masses now look on prevention and treatment of disease no longer as a thing to be bought or given in charity but they claim it as a right.

This is the real significance of the passing away of the Department of Charitable Institutions in Malta and the passing into Government control of the Hospitals in England which hitherto had been charitable institutions "par excellence."

This assumption of power by the masses has brought about the emergence of Entity the *State*. The state was not unknown to the old Greek republics and to the independent cities of Mediaval Italy, but never before has it played such an important part in our lives. The State shares our income and our spoils. In time of war it demands our bodies and in some countries it is also claiming the soul and is even trying to displace God Almighty from His throne and to reign Supreme.

It is to the State that the people cry out when sick and the state in order to satisfy them has cast its eyes on medicine and is trying to get hold of the Medical Profession, and to turn it into a State Service. Medicine is a free profession, it resents shackles and is resisting, but the State is all powerful and in the end the State will win as has happened in England and a state medical service will come into being.

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As long as Medical Practice is given a reasonable freedom no great harm can happen but if shakled too much Medicine is apt to pine and die and if Medicine dies the State will die.

We have an instance in Nazi Germany.

Given a reasonable amount of freedom especially freedom from exploitation, a State Medical service would not be a bad thing after all.

Bound by its code to give its services

without regard to subsequent remuneration our profession has been particularly liable to exploitation both by Government and by individuals and lucky is the Doctor who is paid for more than 50% of his work.

Medical treatment nowadays is no longer an act of charity. People demand it as their due why should we not claim our due? If we are united and with the help of St. Luke we shall succeed.