

MALTA AND ITS MEDICAL SCHOOL

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The Maltese Islands have known the handiwork of man since the Stone Age about 3000 years B.C. They were later colonized by the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians and subsequently enjoyed the benefits of Roman civilization and shared in the Arab invasions of the Mediterranean. In 1099 they were conquered by the Normans and from then onwards formed part of the domains of the Kings of Sicily until they were handed over to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in 1530.

A medical service begins to emerge from the shadows that envelop our social history in the early 14th century when the small Hospital of the Holy Ghost was functioning at Rabat near the ancient capital city of Mdina; but the origins of formal medical education in Malta begin in the last quarter of the 17th century.

The first to be established was a School of Anatomy and Surgery which was founded on the 19th December 1676 by Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner, the Head of the Order of St. John which then still ruled over the Maltese Islands.

The Director and Teacher was a physician who gave lectures at the Holy Infirmary of Valletta to the barber-surgeons of the hospital and to other young men who aspired to become surgeons. They were taken for training at an early age — sometimes as early as 12 years — were required to be able to read and write, and had to undergo a course of studies and practical training lasting ten years.

The first Director and Teacher was Dr. Joseph Zammit who besides being a physician was also a priest and a member of the Order of St. John. This combination of priest and physician was a continuation of the medieval tradition when priests played an important role in the study and practice of medicine on the continent of Europe since at least the 10th century. Zammit was, besides, the physician-in-chief of five successive Grand Masters, the founder of a garden of medicinal herbs for the practical instruction of his students, and the donor of a library which was set up in the Holy Infirmary.

At this period, however, no dissection was performed perhaps because Zammit, being a priest, was debarred from cutting up the human body in the same way as ecclesiastics had been forbidden by the Lateran Council of 1215 from carrying out surgical operations; but in the first quarter of the 18th century a Maltese surgeon was sent to study anatomy at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova at Florence and on his return to Malta in 1723 public lectures in anatomy with demonstrations on the cadaver became a regular feature of the School. From this time onwards special stress was laid on the attendance of students at the anatomical dissections and demonstrations while it was also made obligatory on the surgeons and barber-surgeons of the Holy Infirmary and of the navy of the Order of St. John to take part in these anatomical sessions. To forestall objections to the dissection of the human body and to provide the teacher of anatomy with the necessary material, it was laid down that the corpses of the knights and of patients dying in the Infirmary were to be dissected by the teacher of the School. This measure was a noteworthy advance quite in contrast with arrangements existing in some contemporary medical schools on the continent and in Great Britain where only the unclaimed bodies of patients and of executed criminals were available for dissection. You will remember, for instance, how John Hunter in London at the same period had to purchase corpses for dissection from the notorious body-snatchers who stole the cadavers from undertaker's houses and even from cemeteries to sell them to the anatomy schools. The same practice — and even worse — was happening in Scotland.

In accordance with the ideas of the time dissection was only considered to be without danger to health in the winter months and so none was carried out in summer; however to make up for this seasonal interruption in the study of practical anatomy, a number of anatomical models in coloured wax was acquired thus enabling the students to follow their studies all the year round.

Apart from anatomical sessions the students

also assisted at operations, supervised operated cases for signs of bleeding, received practical instruction in the use of the catheter and took part in postmortem examinations.

The School was at its peak between 1765 and 1797. It was then under the physician and surgeon Michael Angelo Grima who, after undergoing preliminary training at the Malta Holy Infirmary, studied medicine at Pisa and surgery at Florence. Here he experimented successfully on the suturing of the intestines in dogs by means of a spiral or continuous stitch and pointed out the possibility of the resection and suturing of the intestines in the human being. At the same period (1754) he removed the spleen from the dog with recovery of the animal and suggested that the same operation was feasible on the human being when this organ was injured by penetrating wounds of the abdomen. Grima is thus one of the early pioneers of experimental abdominal surgery.

During the Seven Years War (1756-63) between England and Prussia on one side and France, Austria and Russia on the other, Grima served as military surgeon for two years with the French forces. He thus formed the view that war is the great school not only of traumatic surgery but of the whole of medicine. How true that observation is we have learned ourselves in connection with the two world wars of this century. As a result of his experiences in the military hospital at Cassel he published a book on wound surgery in which he discusses the diagnosis and describes the treatment of wounds and of head injuries. It is of interest to recall that Grima was a contemporary of John Hunter who like the Maltese surgeon saw active service in the same war, though on the opposite side (1760-63), and who also wrote a great work on gunshot wounds.

Grima introduced the teaching of operative surgery in our school so that every student, before qualifying as a surgeon, had to pass a practical test in this subject.

In those days the accepted method of teaching consisted in the dictation of notes by the lecturer — a tiring and discouraging procedure. To overcome this drudgery, Grima published a textbook on anatomy for the benefit of his students. He wrote other works in French, Italian and Latin among which one on popliteal aneurysm which he published in London in 1773.

In 1769 the Jesuits were expelled from Malta and their property was seized by the Order of St. John. Out of the revenues accruing from this property a University was founded by Grand Master Em. Pinto de Fonseca but it was

not until 1771 that the Faculties of Theology, Law and Medicine were established. While, before this year, young Maltese men wishing to become surgeons had been able to pursue their studies at the Malta Surgical School, those who aspired to follow medicine and become physicians had to study and obtain their qualifications abroad as no facilities existed locally for the formal teaching of medicine. They usually joined a medical school or university in Italy or France, most of them going to Naples, Salerno and Montpellier. This state of affairs was remedied in 1771 by the establishment in Malta of a university and the incorporation of the School of Anatomy and Surgery in the new Medical Faculty. Thus Maltese students were able, from then onwards, to study both surgery and medicine in Malta.

After a Preparatory Course leading to the degree of Master of Arts, the student entered on the Academical Course proper which lasted five years. The Doctorate of Medicine was granted at the end of this course after approval of the student at a private and a public examination. The licence to exercise the profession was not, however, issued to him until he had done six years clinical practice at the Holy Infirmary.

While these educational developments were taking place in the medical field in Malta, the continent of Europe was being swept by a great political upheaval. From the turmoil of the French Revolution issued forth the dynamic military genius of Napoleon Bonaparte. In June 1798 the French general appeared off Malta with a mighty fleet and a great army on his way for the invasion of Egypt. The Order of St. John surrendered the Maltese Islands to the French forces without a struggle. There followed an unhappy time for our cultural life as the new masters abolished the university and medical studies were interrupted for the next two years.

Meanwhile Horatio Nelson had been shadowing Napoleon in the Mediterranean; the Maltese rose against the French and penned them inside the fortifications around the Grand Harbour and appealed to Nelson to come to their aid by blockading the French from the sea and thus cut off all their supplies. After a siege of two years, the French capitulated and the Maltese placed themselves under the protection of His Britannic Majesty.

One of the first acts of the British Royal Commissioner at the head of the Maltese government was the re-establishment of the University on the 6th November 1800 and the resumption of medical studies so that by 1804 the first medical men to qualify under British rule obtained their warrant to practice. Al-

though in the early decades of the 19th century a number of Maltese students still went abroad to pursue their medical studies they no longer confined themselves to Italy and France but in 1834 opened a new trek this time to Edinburgh which was then at the height of its fame as a medical centre.

By 1838 the Medical Faculty of our University was brought into line with the standards of medical schools in England so much so that in July of the following year His Excellency the Governor of Malta, Sir Henry Bouverie, wrote to the University of London to acknowledge the medical students of our University on the same footing as other students of medical schools in the United Kingdom. A few weeks after the receipt of His Excellency's despatch the Senate of London University resolved to admit candidates from the Malta medical school for the degrees of the University of London.

Progress in medical education continued to gain impetus so that when in 1878 Mr. Patrick Joseph Keenan, Resident Commissioner of National Education in Ireland, was sent to Malta to inquire into our educational system, he declared "that the University of Malta presents, in the case of every one who obtains its degree, a well qualified doctor and surgeon".

By the turn of the century British medical institutions had recognized our medical examinations and degrees. In 1898 the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Surgeons of England allowed medical graduates of our University to sit for the final examination of the Conjoint Board. In 1899 the Society of Apothecaries of London recognised the medical course of studies pursued in Malta and granted admission to Maltese graduates to the examination for the diploma of the Society. In 1901 medical graduates from our university became entitled to register and practise in the United Kingdom. Reciprocal recognition of medical qualifications was established early in 1954 with New South Wales; with the state of Victoria in 1955 and with Western Australia and with Pakistan in 1957. Thanks to these outlets Maltese doctors have served in the Colonial Medical Service and in the medical branches of the British Armed Forces. Others have settled and are practising in the United Kingdom while some of our specialists have been given special assignments in various

parts of the globe by the World Health Organization in the control and treatment of infectious diseases. Thus although our roots run deep into the past we belong to the present for we have all along been assimilating new ideas, increasing our wealth of experience and broadening our horizon.

In this process of maturation we have been forging strong links with British medicine since our political connexion with Great Britain at the beginning of the 19th century. A few instances will be mentioned. Malta was one of the first British territories to enjoy the benefits of Jenner's discovery of vaccination in 1800; Sir Thomas Spencer Wells, the pioneer in 1847 of ether anaesthesia in Malta, belonged to the Maltese Medical Society of Encouragement some of whose members submitted themselves to his practical demonstrations on the effects of ether inhalation; Professor Salvatore Pisani, with other Maltese surgeons, worked with Florence Nightingale at the Crimea and gained her admiration for his stirring work with the sick and wounded. It was to the mutual respect between British and Maltese doctors that the Malta Branch of the BMA owed its origin in 1888. Two years earlier Sir David Bruce received such great help from Dr. Giuseppe Caruana Scicluna in the preparation of agar media that were it not for this assistance he would not have succeeded, as he himself declared, in culturing the microbe responsible for human brucellosis; Sir Themistocles Zammit, the only Maltese member of the Mediterranean Fever Commission of 1904-6 worked hand in hand with his British associates and became immortalised for his fundamental discovery of the microbe of Undulant Fever in the blood of the goat, thus furnishing the key for the eradication of this disease from the Maltese Islands. During the First World War our medical students joined the RAMC while our medical professors and lecturers worked with such distinguished consultants as Col. Charles Ballance and Col. A. Garrod.

This traditional spirit of Anglo-Maltese collaboration was strengthened during the Second World War and persists to this very day. We are indeed making history to-day for when the BMA moves out of British soil for its Annual Clinical Meeting, the venue and the hosts are Malta and the Maltese medical profession.