

The Control of Pharmaceutical Supplies in the Navy of the Order of St. John in Malta

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I have elsewhere dealt with the organization of the naval medical service of the Order of St. John while in Malta and with the various duties of the professional personnel afloat⁽¹⁾.

The ship's crew usually consisted of 30 to 35 knights and 200 soldiers besides technical officers, artificers and mariners; and some 340 oarsmen who were either slaves, convicts or mercenaries known as *buonavoglie*. The need of having medical men on board to look after the health of this mass of men — approaching the 500 to 600 mark — was duly recognised by the Order; in fact a medical team consisting of a physician; a surgeon and sometimes an assistant surgeon and a barber-surgeon, formed part of the ship's company⁽²⁾.

As the number of ships in the Order's navy never exceeded ten at one time, the whole medical staff must have consisted, at the maximum, of two physicians, ten surgeons, ten assistant surgeons and twenty barber-surgeons. The pharmacist never formed part of this naval medical team though he occupied an important post on the professional staff of the Order's hospital in Malta since at least 1555⁽³⁾. In the absence of a pharmacist on board, the officials entrusted with the storage, issue and administrative control of medicaments required for the crews were a knight, called the *Re della galera*, who among other duties had to countersign the bills showing the expenses connected with the issue of medicaments; the surgeon and the barber-surgeon.

Until 1757 the medicinals needed for the crews of the Galley Squadron were bought by the naval surgeons themselves. For some time the Treasury of the Order had been receiving frequent complaints from the crews regarding this practice. Having ascertained that "in the majority of cases these complaints were quite true and well founded, the Treasury Commissioners, being very keen that sick crews should be "well treated", issued a decree on the 15th November of that year aiming at the elimination of the "abuses" to which the prevailing system of ac-

quiring and issuing the drugs gave place⁽⁴⁾.

The decree laid down that in future the Medicine Box of every galley was to be furnished with drugs from the pharmacy of the Holy Infirmary of Valletta. Thus the drugs were no longer to be purchased by the surgeons but were to be provided at the expense of the Common Treasury. This Box was to have two different locks and keys — one key to be kept by the *Re* or *provveditore* of each galley and the other key to be retained by the surgeon. The *Re* was to be present during the daily compounding of the medicaments and during any other occasion when drugs had to be issued.

All medicaments prescribed by the Physician of the Squadron were to be registered by the barber-surgeon and countersigned by the physician in an apposite register to be kept in the Medicine Box. In the same register were also recorded the remedies for external application ordered by the surgeon who, like the physician, had to countersign them. The decree confirmed the "old established rule", set down by the Congregation of the Galleys, which "severely prohibited the surgeons from administering any internal remedy".

Apart from the medicaments, the Medicine Box was to contain also the tow, calico and bed-sheets for the use of the sick. The daily consumption of these items was to be entered in the register already mentioned and signed by the *Re* of the galley.

Before the departure of the squadron from Malta, the *Re* together with the Government Physician-in-Chief (*protomedico*) and the Physician of the Galleys, was to be present during the preparation of the Medicine Box at the pharmacy of the Infirmary. The clerk of the *Re* was to keep a note of the quantities, weights and qualities of the various items.

On returning to port at the end of the cruise, the Medicine Box was conveyed to the pharmacy of the Holy Infirmary and the items checked to ensure that no excess of medicaments was issued over and above the amounts

Decreto della Vendera Camera Relativo all'Amministrazione
 de' Medicamenti forniti a spese de' Cerusici della Squadra
 delle Galere per l'Equipaggi delle medesime; Emanato
 sotto li 15. Gbre 1757.

Li Vendi Granjornni. Re. E.

Informate Noi delle Frequenti doglianze degl'Equipaggi della
 Galere relative all'Amministrazione de' Medicamenti forniti
 a spese de' rispettivi Cerusici nelle occorrenze delle loro Infer-
 mita, e riconosciute queste essere nella maggior parte troppo
 uere, e fondate, mossi dallo zelo della ospitalita, e della pre-
 muza, che giustamente abbiamo, che siano dotti Nostri Equi:

11.11.1757

Fig. 1. The opening paragraph of the decree of the 15th November 1757 recording the complaints of the crews regarding the management of medicinal preparations on the part of the naval surgeons. Courtesy of National Library, Valletta.

prescribed by the physician and the surgeon as recorded in the apposite register. Any unauthorised issue of medicaments had to be paid for by the surgeon from his own pocket. At the end of the year the registers were submitted for examination to the Treasury for calculating the total expenditure for drugs and medical supplies incurred by the squadron.

Every member of the crew had a portion of money deducted from his wage. Part of this levy was passed on to the surgeon, in addition to his salary, and the remainder was held by the Treasury to defray part of the cost of the medicaments provided for the squadron. The surgeon was also allowed to continue to receive treatment fees from the *buonavoglie* and from other members of the crew suffering from venereal diseases. He was, however, to continue to provide his surgical instruments from his own purse.

The galley captain was responsible for the supply, from funds issued by the Treasury, of wine, oil, pots, porringers and almond drinks for the use of sick seamen; while the *Re* was to ensure that there was no increase in the issues

of bed-sheets for the sick berth and for tearing into strips for bandages and dressings for the wounded.

Finally, the decree contained two provisions consideration of which falls outside the scope of this paper but which deserve mention for the sake of completeness. First, was the granting of an increase in salary to the surgeons and barber-surgeons; and second, the establishment of the principle that when weighing the merits of surgeons and barber-surgeons for promotion, the Venerable Congregation of the Galleys "was always to give preference to the most competent candidate without any regard to seniority as the appointment to such posts must always be decided solely according to his ability"⁽⁵⁾ — an administrative principle that after more than two centuries has not yet received the recognition and the practical application that it deserves.

Discussion

The opening paragraph of the decree refers to "complaints" by the crews and to "abuses" regarding the management of the medicaments destined for sick seamen on board the galleys.

"necessarij. et tale effetto si raccomanda alla suddetta Vendita Congregazione in occasione di promozioni di Cerusici, e Barbe: rotti dar sempre la preferenza alli più capaci senza riguardo all'anzianità, stantedi in tali posti si deve dar luogo alla sola capacità".

Undecimo si raccomanda infine alla detta Vendita Congregazione delle Galere di fare puntualmente, ed esattamente osservare questa nostra Ordinanza, e non altrimenti.

Fig. 2. The last paragraph of the decree establishing the principle that promotions of the surgical staff were to be given according to professional competence and not to seniority. Courtesy of National Library, Valletta.

The decree, however, does not specify what these "complaints" and "abuses" were. Various possibilities come to mind. Did the surgeons fob off the patients with lower doses than those actually prescribed by the physicians to make the ingredients last as much as possible and thus spend less of their own money on drugs? Did the surgeons use false weights and measures to economise on the prescription? Did they claim to have purchased larger quantities of drugs than the amounts they had actually bought? Or did they charge for ingredients which were never acquired and used? Did the money spent by the surgeons represent actual market prices or were the claimed prices inflated ones?

If the above irregularities did occur how were they finally detected? Were any investigations carried out by the Congregation of the Galleys or the Treasury to establish the nature and gravity of such possible frauds; and if so, with what results? Unfortunately the decree is silent on these points. No other documents on the matter have so far been encountered. We are, therefore, left guessing what the "complaints" and "abuses" were and where the faults — if any — lay.

Irrespective of the nature of the irregularities, the Congregation of the Galleys seems to have availed itself of the occasion to restrict the issue and use of medicaments to realistic levels and thus prevent the acquisition of large or unwanted quantities of drugs — perhaps at exorbitant costs.

The provision of a Medicine Box with two different locks and keys, with one key retained by the *Re* and the other kept by the surgeon, ensured that none of the two officials could open the Box in the absence of the other one. Embezzlement of medicaments at the primary source was thus forestalled. The scrutiny of the contents of the Box both before the departure of the galley and after its return furnished an additional check on the possibility of fraud — as did the comparison of the quantities of drugs actually remaining in the Box with the quantities recorded in the register as having been consumed by the patients.

One last reflection. How are we to interpret the increases in salaries accorded to the surgeons, etc. in the context of the references to grievances and to "abuses"? Were these salary increases a tacit recognition by the Congregation of the Galley or the Treasury that the surgeons were insufficiently paid and that, because of this, they were more liable to temptation and to resorting to fraudulent ways of augmenting their income by overcharging the Treasury for the drugs they had purchased?

In the absence of any documentary evidence it is reasonable to extend the benefit of the doubt to the surgeons and to clear them of having mismanaged the supply and use of medicaments in the Order's navy; yet we cannot escape the lingering thought that something had gone wrong in the administrative arrangements that regulated the purchase and use of medicaments prior to 1757. Indeed knowing that human nature does

not change, we may be allowed to ask:- What happened after the issue of this decree of 1757? In other words, did the Treasury succeed in ensuring that sick crews were provided with an adequate and genuine supply of medicaments; that the new arrangements were sufficiently fool-proof so that the Treasury was not cheated by some clever stratagem conceived by some ingenious official aiming at lining his own pocket at public expense?

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4. Archive 654, fol. 220, National Library of Malta, Valletta.
5. *Ibidem*, fol. 221 v.