Historical Perspective

Reforms in the Holy Infirmary, 1680

Giovanni Bonello

The Holy Infirmary, at least in theory, bore witness to the very raison d’etre of the Order of St John – the care of the infirm. If the knights came to be known as the Hospitallers, it is because the care of the sick became their historical mission through the centuries, a mission they never abandoned.

In fact, the nursing of those in pain accounts for the major differences in popular perceptions between the Knights Templar and those of St John – both were military orders manned by warrior-cavaliers. But the Templars turned exclusively into warlords and aristocrats who wielded great power and riches and were content to feel important. The Hospitallers, on the other hand, equally powerful and wealthy, tended the sick wherever they had communities in Europe. The common people resented the hauteur and arrogance of the Templars, but warmed up to the charity of the caring hospital service provided by the Hospitallers in many parts of Europe, at a time when hospitals figured quite low on the civic agenda.

The Order’s statutes regulated in detail the hospitaller aspect of its activities, starting from ancient enactments grouped in the collection of internal governance under the heading de Hospitalitate. Some of these regulations go back to the earliest times and formed part of what today we would call the constitution – the basic law of the Order. Periodically, however, the competent organs issued new directives or regulations, in response to current exigencies or when reforms in the running of the Infermeria were deemed necessary. Many of these regulations have already been recorded and studied.

I will here focus on two deliberations of the Council of State which, in 1680, followed one another in the space of two days, at the very tail-end of the rule of Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner. I believe them interesting enough to examine and comment cursorily, and to record them in full (in translation from Italian) as they are mostly self-explanatory.1

Of these two deliberations, the first is the most far-reaching in scope, while the next one deals with the recruitment and duties of a second assistant physician. In conformity with ancient practice, before deciding on important matters the Council of State appointed a commission to study what was at issue and then make recommendations. On December 19, 1679, the Council selected two leading knights, the Grand Conservator (head of the Langue of Aragon) Fra Don Felipe Inigues Aierbe together with the titular Prior of England, Stefano Maria Lomellini (+1699) for this purpose. Three months later they reported back, and the Council unanimously adopted their suggestions.

The second deliberation seems to have followed an expedited iter, without recourse to the advice of knights-rapporteur.

These deliberations give some indication of the physical layout of the main infirmary in Valletta. One finds mention in them of the dysentery ward, the pharmacy, the ward for convalescents, the store rooms, a new ward for those suffering “from varoli (smallpox) and other infectious diseases”, the three wards and a room for the assistant physician to sleep in when not on duty.

Special reference is made to the falanga, the ward reserved to those suffering from sexually transmitted diseases. This particular entry makes another point clear, viz, that those who had contracted leprosy were also confined to the falanga, in virtue of the common belief that leprosy counted with the venereal diseases, or at least, as punishment on those who indulged in excessive or prohibited venery: “the certain

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knowledge that leprosy was the outward and visible sign of a soul corroded by sin and in particular, by sexual sin.⁷⁸ Rather embarrassing, considering the story that one of the earlier Grand Masters suffered from leprosy.

Being declared a leper entailed the most serious consequences indeed and one cannot say it was not a decision taken seriously. Differently from all other suspected infirmities, a diagnosis of leprosy required the concurrence of all the physicians and surgeons employed in the Sacra Infermeria, in the presence of the titular boss of the infirmary – the Grand Hospitalier (head of the French Langue) or his deputy, and of the Prud'hommes (the administrators responsible for the hospital). A diagnosis of leprosy did not necessitate unaniity, but a full consultation with each and every member of the medical staff.

The first deliberation gives an inking about medical treatment and case management too. It starts with disabled foreigners without support by relatives and others. As sustenance they were only entitled to the convento, but without the wine ration. The convento seems to have been the minimum common hospital diet without choice – a phrase retained in modern Maltese: dak li jaghdidi l-kunvent. Those for whom better nutrition formed part of their medical treatment, had to be returned from the falanga to the infirmary, lepers always excepted.

Specific mention is made of the treatment of venereal diseases (no differentiation between syphilis, gonorrhea and other STDs cluttered medical textbooks then), which consisted mostly in the spalmatura, the rubbing with a mercury ointment and the inhalation of mercury fumes in an overheated room under layers of blankets to induce copious sweating. This report expressly delegated the unction of diseased venereal patients to a forzato, a prisoner, probably because other paramedics would likely have been unwilling to undertake this close body contact with syphilitics. For his pains the forzato got three grani a day and meals when on duty, and six grani when off.

The silverware of the infirmary constituted both its boast and its nightmare. Probably the only hospital in Europe to serve even the most rejected patients their meals in silver dishes, plates, equelles, ewers, cups and cutlery, as witnessed with unexceptional amazement by many foreign visitors – but with high risks of pilfering and wear and tear.

The deliberations, well reflecting these concerns, dented, and to the prejudice of the signori infermi (our lords the sick), the universal and matter-of-fact use of silver. They referred to the “complaints made to us about the daily loss of silverware” and the chronic shortage of dinner services – never enough to go round the huge hospital.

The commissioners proposed a revolutionary measure – that a large amount of table services in stagno be acquired to cope with the demand. Stagno translates into tin, but I am rather inclined to believe the commissioners recommended pewter – a more noble alloy of tin and lead, pettro in Italian.

To save on the wear and tear of silver, the report recommended a strict prohibition for anyone, including the ward guardians, to boil eggs or cook vegetables in silver utensils. Instead, in the future, each ward would be supplied with two cazzole (cooking pots) one large and one small, made of copper and internally well lined with tin – the large one to have water continually on the boil to cook fresh eggs for the patients, the smaller one to re-heat the meat consommés or other broths for those who, on doctors’ orders took their food after normal eating hours.

Sufficient coal had to be supplied to the wards for these extra cooking arrangements – two mondelli a week to each ward during weeks when meat was permitted, and double that during weeks of fasting and abstinence. This would increase the consumption of coal by an estimated 59 tumula a year – no big deal, the commissioners emphasised, seeing the Order only paid for coal at one tari a tumulo – very little indeed compared to the substantial savings to be made on the silver stocks. And, as an afterthought, the report added, to prevent the abuse of melting the tin (pewter?) utensils, the guardians shall be banned from placing objects of tin on the fire, but instead make use of the said copper cazzole.

Illegitimate children too, ranked high on the list of concerns of the Infermeria, and the first deliberations addressed this issue twice. The report suggested that the hospitaliera (chief female nurse) be entitled to receive daily for bastard children and other patients in her care, four loaves of flattened bread (schiacciati, flat bread still a delicacy in Italy), half a quartuccio (cfr Maltese quartoc) of wine, ten grani in cash, a measure of oil and, each week, two tumula of coal.

The report then refers to “the sinister accidents which happen daily in the upbringing of bastard children” without specifying what these everyday mishaps would have been. The context however leaves little doubt that what the authorities resented was the fostering of abandoned children by prostitutes – a far-sighted investment in future generations of young whores. A peremptory order prohibited children being given for upbringing to donne meretrici, including those who offered to acknowledge the orphans as their own offspring.

These could, instead, be ceded by contract as servants to others willing to rear them, subject to a few conditions: firstly, that boys had to be shown yearly by their contracted masters to the Gran Ospitaliere or his lieutenant on the feast of St John, and girls on Easter day to the Ospitaliera, who then reported to the Hospitalier on the state of nourishment of the girls examined. Those who defaulted paid a fine of six tari to the utilità dei poveri – the service for the relief of the indigent which distributed one tari a day to each pauper who came to collect the alms from the infirmary, but had to do so in the street, not being allowed inside.

The contract bound the carer to maintain the child-servant up to the age of twenty. If the carers had second thoughts and wanted to return the children before their twentieth birthday, they could, but had to pay a penalty for each year they had taken advantage of the services of the child-servant. The deliberation valued boys’ work at two scudi a year, and girls’ almost double: three scudi and a half – a grim acknowledgement of the superior value of females on the child labour front.
The final condition referred to the death of a child in care. The master had to furnish an authentic copy of the death certificate by the parish priest who had buried the child for the clerk of the infirmary to enter in the register of bastard children. The deliberation placed the notary drawing up the contract under an obligation to include these stipulations expressly “in order that no one will be able to plead ignorance.”

The deliberation following regarded almost exclusively the creation of the post of a second assistant physician (prattico) in the infirmary. The hospital already employed one assistant physician, but “the number of patients has increased to such an extent that the prattico is unable to carry out all that is necessary for the service of the Sacred Infirmary” adding philosophically by way of a truism that “the fatigue of one is relieved if shared by two.”

The Council of State decided that henceforth two physician’s prattici would take care of the needs of the infirmary, sharing the burdens of work alternatively, it being understood that only the one on actual duty was entitled to the pittanza (the meal allowance). The Council established a remuneration of 110 scudi yearly each, together with four scudi worth of candles as an annual bonus. (Mattia Preti charged 50 scudi for an easel painting).

The roster changed between the two incumbents on the 16th day of each month. Being off duty did not, however, mean exactly that. The one on leave had still to sleep in the room reserved for that purpose in the infirmary. At 3.00 pm he was to proceed to the pharmacy to oversee the preparation of all medicines which were then to be placed in a tin or pewter container, easily distinguishable one from the other, and on which the number of the bed of the patient was to be marked. Some of these numbers, painted on the walls of the wards, can still be seen today. Assigning a number to a patient (our lords the sick) did not have a dehumanising motive, but rather aimed at avoiding errors in administering treatment and special diets.

This measure seems to have been a novelty, as the deliberation ordered the construction of a special cupboard to house the containers of the medicaments of which the only key was to be held by the prattico off duty.

At 3.30 am (sic, but possibly a misreading) the prattico not on duty proceeded to the pharmacy to hand over the prepared medicaments to the attendants and he had then to accompany them on their ward rounds to oversee the administration of the prescriptions and to ascertain if the patients were in a state to take them. In case of doubt, he had to inform the pharmacist, so the physician would be consulted when he made his ward round.

His last listed duty remains incomprehensible to me “He will inform himself if the consumati (clear soups?) and the extremeità (the left-overs?) destined for the Diana (?) had been delivered, and if not, he will take the matter up, informing the guardians to provide.”

The prattico on duty for the current month had a different set of responsibilities. At 5.00 am and 11.00 am he would be present at the infirmary to assist the chief physician, also on a monthly roster. And, conscious of how dicey some medics’ handwriting can be, the instructions add peremptorily “and what he writes down must be legible.”

He had to revisit the wards half an hour before the distribution of food, to point out those patients who were to eat at a later time, remaining present throughout the meal to ensure no errors happened when serving the different prescribed menus.

Finally, the regulations expected the prattico on duty to be present again at 10.00 am and 9.00 pm to establish if those who had received purgatives should eat or not; this enabled him to update the physician about the state of the patients on his next visit “so that the latter may give the right remedy.”

Appendix

This 21st day of the month of March 1679 ab incarnatione [1680]. The following report of the Venerable Commissioners charged with visiting the Infermeria having been read, viz:

In compliance with the decree issued on the 19th December 1679, having proceeded to the Sacred Infirmary, and having examined and seen the things that can be seen there, we are of the opinion

1) to lock completely the door that leads from the dysentery ward to the courtyard, except for the service of the pharmacy.

2) Also to shutter the windows of the storeroom, in order to prevent any abuse as, in the state they are in today, fruit of any kind can be smuggled inside.

3) Also, that it would be proper to put into effect the deliberation already taken on previous occasions, to construct a ward to house those ill with varoli and other contagious diseases.

4) Also, that in the falanga are to be admitted only foreigners stroppiati (usually crippled but here disabled by disease) who today are in the Infirmary without any support from relatives or others; and that their meals should only be the convento, without wine; should they require better sustenance, than the patient should be returned to the Infirmary, except for lepers who, before being admitted, shall be examined by all the physicians and surgeons in the presence of the Venerable Hospitaller or his lieutenant the Infirmarian and the Prud’hommes, to ascertain whether it is leprosy. And as for the people of this country, a tari a day shall be given to them as alms outside the Infirmary. Therefore the hospitaliera shall be given for the constant care assigned to her, both of bastard children and of patients, what follows, that is, four loaves of bread schiacciati, half a quartuccio of wine, ten grani in cash,
a measure of oil daily and two tumula of coal each week. And to the prisoner destined to the spalmatura (unction with mercury) shall be given the usual meal he received so far and, when not engaged in the unction, he will receive, instead of three grani a day, six grani. And moreover the same quantity of oil shall continue to be provided as when the falanga was open, that is one measure for every ward in which there are patients; and in the same place Holy Mass shall be celebrated every Sunday and on days of obligation.

5) Also, that it be complied with, that according to use, not to place in the falanga more than 21 persons to receive the unction with mercury, and that neither physicians nor surgeons shall take the patients to the ward destined for convalescents if not after they have completed their last unction, and after the season to give this medication is over, and then they are to be carried to this ward to remain there up to the time they can leave. It being understood that the unction will only be given to the crews of the galleys because of their hard work.

6) Also, we believe it is proper that medicines start being administered at three hours, in order that the officials who want to be present do not lose the recreation break (l'hora della mangia), and that every medicine be placed in a separate container.

7) And finally, to avoid those sinister accidents that happen daily in the upbringing of bastard children, we are of the view that it should be forbidden anytime in the future to give them to prostitutes (donne meretrici) even if they are willing to acknowledge them as their own offspring. And that every time that these children are given by contract, all those who would have them shall be obliged to present them yearly on the feast day of our glorious patron Saint John the Baptist, that is, males to the Venerable Hospitaller or his lieutenant or the Infermerian, and the girls, the day after the feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord, to the Ospitaliera, who shall then report to the Venerable Hospitaller or his lieutenant if the said girls are well nourished or badly.

And that all those who default shall be condemned to pay six tari to the utilità (service) for the poor. And in case that, before the children reach their twentieth year, those they are bound to serve want to return them, those who have them will be bound to pay, for every year they have served, for males two scudi and for females three and a half scudi, and they (the returned children) will be placed in the care of the Conservatore Communale to be given when they will be of the age to be given; and, in case of their death, they shall provide a true certificate of their death from the parish priest who will have buried them, for this to be noted in the register of bastard children by the clerk, who is so entrusted to do. And that these stipulations shall be included by the notary who draws up the contracts of those who in the future will be given, in order that no one will be able to plead ignorance.

And as for the complaints made to us about the daily loss of silverware as it is believed that this is the reason there is not enough to serve the Signori Infermi, without it being our obligation to bring this matter up, about this we are of the view that it would be proper to increase the amount of tableware in pewter (stagno) that is necessary for the number of inmates who can be lodged in the three wards, the silver services not being sufficient for the beds situated in the wall alcoves. And, as many of the Signori Infermi have their food late, it is necessary that their meal be kept in a secure place, and we believe that it would be necessary to place 30 small locks (lockers?) with their keys, in the benches over which they have their meals.

That, moreover, it is prohibited for the guards, or anyone else, under pain of punishment, to cook eggs or vegetables in the said silverware; and for this purpose two cazzole, one small and one large, made of well-tinned copper, shall be given to the guards of all the wards, in which large cazzole they are bound to keep boiling water to boil the eggs, and in the small ones will be heated the consommés and broths of those who, by doctor’s order, dine late. And for this reason two more mondelli of coal shall be supplied to each ward for each week when meat is allowed, and four mondelli a week during lent, which amounts to 59 tumole a year, for which the Order pays no more than one tari a tumolo, a very minor expense compared to the disadvantages derived from the wear of the silverware.

And to prevent the abuse of melting the tin, the guards shall be banned from placing objects of tin on the fire, but they shall instead use the said cazzole.


The Most Eminent and Reverend Grand Master and the Venerable Council unanimously approved by ballot the said report and ordered that it be put into execution with diligence.3

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The same day (23rd March 1680). The Most Excellent and Reverend Grand Master and the Venerable Council have unanimously determined that for the future there is need of two Prattici (assistants) for physicians in the Sacred Infirmary, in conformity with the following regulations:

As in the service of the public the number of patients has increased, to such an extent that the Prattico is unable to carry out all that is necessary for the service of the Sacred Infirmary, it has therefore been judged useful to employ a second one in conformity with the requirements of ordinance number 35 de Hospitalitate, which asserts that it is the prerogative
of the Hospitaller to present him to his Reverend Eminence to be employed, and as the fatigue of one is relieved if shared by two, it has been ordered that henceforth the meal allowance shall be given only to the one on duty, under the usual conditions.

Moreover, yearly four scudi worth of candles each, and 110 scudi yearly salary each, who have to observe the following rules.

Things that have to be done by the **prattico** who is not on monthly duty.

1. Firstly, to sleep, during the whole month when he is not on duty, in the room reserved for the **prattico**.
2. That, at three hours after noon he shall proceed to the pharmacy to oversee the preparation of all medicines, which shall be placed in a pewter pot, distinguishable one from the other, on which shall be written the number of the bed of the patient, and then be placed in the cupboard of which only he will have the key, which cupboard shall be constructed for this purpose.
3. That at three and a half hours in the morning he shall go to the pharmacy to hand them (the medicines) over to those working in the pharmacy and with whom he shall go to administer them to the patient, observing first if they (the medicines? or the patients?) are in such a state that no harm can be caused. If this is doubtful, he will refer the reasons to the pharmacist in order that the physician will be informed during the visit.
4. He will inform himself if the consumati and l’estremità destined for the Diana (?) have been delivered, and if not, he will take care, informing the guards to provide.

Things that have to be done by the **prattico** who is on monthly duty.

1. All that is considered necessary to be ordered for the conduct of the **prattici**, who will start their monthly duty in turn on the 16th of the month.
2. That each morning, before five hours, and one hour before noon, he will visit the Infirmary to assist the monthly physician and what he writes down must be legible.
3. That half an hour before every meal (mangia) he will make his visit, to identify those who should eat later.
4. That he will be present during the meal, to ensure that no errors are committed in serving.
5. That, after the visit, at ten in the morning and also at nine at night, to establish if those who had to have their meal later (li tardanti) should eat or not, as also those who have received purgatives, in order that he may, on the following visit, inform the physician about what has happened, so that the latter may give the right remedy.  

### References

1. AOM 262, f. 101, 102.
3. AOM 262, f. 101.
4. AOM 262, f. 102.