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Croatian Gerontology from the Ancient Times to the Seventeenth Century

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The development of gerontology in Croatia was studied from the available historical material and publications directly or indirectly concerning the subject in the period from the ancient times to the 17th century. The results of the study are presented in the following sections: the beginnings of social-caritative and health care for the elderly and the foundation of first hospitals-xenodochia in Croatia in the period from 6th to 15th century; social and health care for the elderly and disabled in the Dubrovnik Republic from 14th to 16th century; and treatises and attitudes of Croatian physicians, scholars and philosophers on medical, philosophical, and social aspects of aging and old age, dying, and death. According to the indicators of the demographic structure of that time, persons over the age of 50 had a relatively small share in the overall Croatian population, which influenced the orientation to individual solutions of social and health problems related to old age and disability, mainly at the family level. Accordingly, attention has primarily been paid to legal regulation of the position of elderly persons in the family and disposition of their property as a precondition for achieving security in the old age.

Interest in prevention and alleviation of health problems of the elderly did not reach the level of public interest encompassing the overall population, but it remained a privilege of those on the top of the social hierarchy (clergy, nobility, rich citizens). The status of the elderly and development of an organized social-caritative and health care for elderly and disabled in the Croatian towns, communes, and feuds were under a strong influence of Christianity which considered the disabled and abandoned elderly unable to work, poor and life-threatened group requiring merciful Christian assistance of their community. The realization of such help depended to a great extent on the economic and social development and on the financial status of both an individual and religious and social community. This is reflected in the fact that the mechanisms of private and public care were first established in the towns representing commercial-economic, political-strategic or religious centers in Croatia of that period. Old age and aging, dying and death are discussed in the preserved manuscripts and treatises of Croatian physicians, scholars, and philosophers. They are a blend of European attitudes and original deliberations on disease prevention and treatment of the elderly, as well as the ideas on social status and organized public care for the elderly and disabled in an ideally structured state.

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