Dr Ivan Pintar and His Contribution to the Development of History of Medicine in Slovenia

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The Medical School of the Ljubljana University has a long lasting tradition in teaching the history of medicine. Since 1934, all students of medicine and dentistry in Slovenia have attended the courses in history of medicine which were and still are mandatory. The first years of lectures on the history of medicine at the Ljubljana University Medical School coincided with the struggle for the establishment and recognition of a full medical curriculum in Slovenia. Dr Ivan Pintar (1888-1963), the first lecturer of the history of medicine (1934-1963), was a man of great ethical and national values and an ardent advocate for the promotion of Slovene contribution to medical culture in Slovenia, former Yugoslavia, and Europe. Pintar's concept of history of medicine included general historical, sociological, ethical, cultural, psychological, biotechnical, and other aspects. During 30 years of his endeavors, he did a pioneer work in the research on the history of medicine in Slovenia. For many years he was the editor of the Medical Chamber Bulletin, chairman of the Slovene Medical Society, and the founder of the Section for the History of Medicine in 1951. He wrote the first Slovene textbook on the history of medicine and published many articles on prominent physicians from Slovenia. He paved the way for the new generation of medical historians in Slovenia. Owing to him, contemporary Slovene physicians and dentists are aware of the importance of professional tradition. They know how to use the past experiences for new achievements.

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The history of medicine was introduced as a separate course at the Medical School in Ljubljana in 1934. At that time, the chair of the history of medicine was founded and Dr Ivan Pintar, a gynecologist, was appointed as the first chairman. He kept working regular hours as a gynecologist and gave lectures on the history of medicine. Being appointed only as a part-time lecturer, he certainly needed a lot of enthusiasm to fulfill his task. However, after thirty years of hard work and systematic research in the history of medicine, he established a firm basis for the subject. Owing to his commitment to medicine and his engagement in all contemporary medical events in Slovenia, he was elected the chairman of the Slovene Medical Society in 1926 (it was established in 1861). He was the 19th chairman in a row. In 1929, when the Slovenian Medical Journal came out, he was among its first contributors. He was also the editor of the Medical Chamber Bulletin for almost ten years, from 1924 to 1933. He collaborated with the Slovene Biographic Lexicon, where he presented about 140 Slovene doctors and natural scientists in 1925. When the natural science journal Proteus, which is still published nowadays under the same name, appeared in 1933, he helped it with his editorial knowledge and experiences. Dr Pintar participated in all Slovene medical achievements and was always ready to clearly express his views on the history of medicine. He stressed that the study of history of medicine is not a mere l'art pour l'artism but is of vital importance to the young medical students (1). The students should be aware of the enormous effort their predecessors have put into medical research, so that they can develop their knowledge in order to improve man's health and well being.

The beginning years of lecturing of the history of medicine at the University Medical School in Ljubljana (1934/35) coincided with the struggle for the establishment and recognition of a full-curriculum University Medical School in Slovenia. Slovenia got its national University as late as 1919. At the beginning, the Medical School started with only four preclinical semesters at the Medical Faculty. Another two semesters started in 1941, but only in 1945 it became a complete faculty with ten semesters. Therefore, lectures on the history of medicine were of great importance not only from an ethical but also from a national point of view.

Figure 1: Dr Ivan Pintar (1888-1963). [view this figure]
The First Slovene Professional Medical Historian

Ivan Pintar was born in Ljubljana in 1888. He studied medicine at the Vienna University Medical School from 1906 to 1912, and was promoted to medical doctor in 1912. He specialized in gynecology under Professor Halban in the Wieden Hospital in Vienna. In 1914, he worked as a secundarius in Vienna and spent almost the entire time of the war as a reserve sanitary officer in lazarets at the battlefront in the East, from Krakow to the Carpathians. From 1919 to 1922, he continued his specialization in gynecology with Professor Alojz Zalokar at the Ljubljana Gynecological-Obstetrical Clinic. Afterwards he worked as a gynecologist at the Social Insurance Service until his retirement in 1952. He was interested in art and was a good painter himself. He was also fond of languages and history. As a first-class physician and thinker he was soon elected the chairman of the Slovenian Medical Chamber and appointed the editor-in-chief of its bulletin (Bulletin of the Slovenian Medical Chamber) from 1924 to 1933.

Dr Ivan Pintar always emphasized that the history of medicine was an independent medical profession, regarding its contents, findings, research, evaluation, and publications. Its scope is extremely wide, almost unlimited; it covers all periods, sources, and methods important for the historical analysis of the relationship between the man, health, and disease. Pintar believed that the history of medicine was a necessary and obligatory subject at the University Medical School and that it should keep abreast with other East European universities regarding the quality of lectures, number and length of courses, and general and specific knowledge of students graduating from this subject (2). He was Assistant Professor known for his proficiency and interesting lectures. In the first year (1934/35), 32% of his students came from the classical grammar schools, 30% of students were women, and 70% were of Slovene nationality (3). During the first decade of the Slovene national university, the history of medicine as a part of medical curriculum was of great national importance as it was primarily concerned with Slovene medical history. Even today, after gaining their independence, the Slovenes seek their national identity in professional spheres.

Pintar's students were soon aware of ethical and philosophical significance of his lectures. They did not mind attending his lectures on Saturday mornings or evenings. The exams, in which the students acquired additional knowledge and valuable experiences for their further study, were friendly conversations of equal partners.

Important Slovene Physicians

Ivan Pintar was the first professional Slovene medical historian. With his work he promoted the knowledge about the developments in medicine and wrote the first Slovene textbook on this subject (4). Even more important are his publications on the lives and work of well known Slovene doctors in the past and many other doctors that were active among Slovene people. In the medical journal Zdravniški vestnik, the pioneer of the journal of the Slovene Medical Society, he presented a number of Slovenian scientists (5): Vinko Kern, who introduced vaccination against smallpox (6); Edo Šljajmer, the pioneer of modern surgery in Ljubljana (7), Marko Gerbec, the first Slovenian scientist in medicine (8); Jurij Karol Starovšnik from Kamnik, who became famous as a rector and dean of the University in Freiburg in Breisgau (9); David Verbec, a well known physicist in Ljubljana (10); Ludvik Gerbec, a doctor of the miners in Idrija (11); three doctors from Valvasor's "The Glory of the province of Carniola", Janez Gašper Corusi (12), Ivan Krstnik Brložnik (13), and Janez Andrej de Coppinis (14). He also wrote about Ivan Benedikt Gruendl who published the first professional report on the spa of Rogaška Slatina (15); Gregorij Karbonarj, personal doctor of the Russian tsar Peter the Great (16); Fran Viljem Lipiæ, another important physicist in Ljubljana, who wrote the famous Topography of Ljubljana (17); Janez Plešenik, the first anatomist at the Medical Faculty in Ljubljana (18); Pavel Krajc (19); Marko Anton Plenëiè, a pioneer of modern microbiology (20); Šimen Pertot, the founder of paper chromatography (21); and Ljudevít Merèun, a promising specialist for internal diseases in Ljubljana (22).

Development of Slovene Obstetrics

As a gynecologist and obstetrician Pintar was particularly interested in the development of obstetrics in Slovenia (23) and its protagonists about which he wrote in the journal of obstetrics Babški vestnik. He wrote about obstetricians Anton Makovic (24), Jan Matovšek (25), Alojz Valenta (26), and Ivan Nepomuk Koemm (27), who authored Slovene textbooks on obstetrics. He also did research on the development of the School of Obstetrics in Trieste (28) and the Slovenian literature on obstetrics in the medical journal Lijeënleri k vjesnik (29), which had also been the official journal of the Slovenian Medical Society since 1893. He wrote also a concise textbook on obstetrics (30).

Pintar's Research Work

In his dissertation thesis, Pintar described the development of the Medico-Surgical school in Ljubljana from 1782 to 1850. Based on archive sources, he wrote an excellent monograph revealing the importance of the first South-Slavic medical lycceum Mediko-kirurški uëni zavod. With this work Pintar
was promoted as a private assistant professor of the history of medicine in 1939 (31, 32). The second World War also affected Pintar. He was deported to Dachau (33) where he shared the common fate with some of the well known Slovene doctors: psychiatrist Lev Milčinski, physician Ivan Pavšič, anthropologist Božo Škerlj and writer Dr Lojz Kraigher. Fortunately their lives were spared. After the war, Pintar turned from a simple bibliographical analysis to a deeper analytical research of the importance of individual Slovene doctors and their works (34). Thus, he studied the Plenčič’s theory of contagium (20), and Scopoli’s contribution to the hygiene of the work in the mercury mine in Idria (35). He also made a significant contribution to the knowledge of the Gerbec’s findings on diseases of the circulatory and hematopoietic system (36,37). After Pintar’s death in 1963, the Slovene Academy of Science and Arts (SAZU) published his detailed study of Gerbec’s work (38). In this study Pintar presented Gerbec’s first description of the symptoms of the complete atrio-ventricular cardiac block. Based on Pintar’s analysis, Dr Drago Mušič tried to establish Gerbec’s primacy on this discovery and named this disorder syndroma Gerbezius-Morgagni-Adams-Stokes (39). Thus, Gerbec’s work attracted the interest of the Slovene medical community, and the Slovene Medical Society decided to name the highest award for the most prominent achievements in medicine after him. But there was only little interest from abroad to establish Gerbec’s priority. As his last research work, Pintar, together with the leading Slovene anthropologist B. Škerlj, began a paleopathological study on the ancient Slave skeletons (40). Unfortunately his death ended this project. Dr Pintar was also the contributor to the Yugoslav Encyclopedia and Medical Encyclopedia, both published by the Lexicographic Institute in Zagreb, Croatia. Pintar’s connections with Croatian medical historians Professor Lujo Thaller and Dr Vladimir Bazala were very close and long lasting.

Pintar’s Organizing Work

In 1938, Yugoslavia hosted the 11th International Congress of the Societe International de l’Histoire de Medicine. The congress was held in Zagreb, Belgrade, Dubrovnik, and Sarajevo. Among the participants were the most prominent medical historians from 28 countries of Europe, America, Australia, and Africa. Dr Pintar and Dr Karlin were the only attendants from Slovenia. As early as 1930, Dr Pintar worked on the foundation of the Section for the History of Medicine within the Slovene Medical Society. In this efforts he gained the collaboration of Dr Franc Derganc, the first editor of the Slovene Medical Journal, and much later Dr Mirko Karlin. However, it was not until 1951 that the Section for the History of Medicine was founded in the Slovene Medical Society in Ljubljana. Among the founders were Drs Ivan Pintar, Drago Mušič, Mirko Karlin, and Peter Borisov, at that time a student of medicine (41). In 1955, Yugoslav Society for the History of Medicine, Pharmacy and Veterinary Medicine was founded (42) and Dr Pintar was among its founders. The Slovene Society for the History of Medicine was founded in 1963, with Dr Pintar as president and Dr P. Borisov as the secretary.

Concluding Remarks

Erudite, polyglot, and classically educated physician, Professor Pintar introduced, with his fruitful work, a new branch into Slovene medicine – history of medicine. He presented its methodology, manner of work, and different kind of thinking. By this medical philosophy he contextualized what was going on in medicine. He showed the logic of the medical development, and the possibilities to learn from the past. He revived the achievements of the first Slovene physicians and scientists, most importantly of Marko Gerbec, Mihael Žagar, and Marko Anton Plenčič. Their discoveries met with a wide response in the world. In his analytical work, he performed an important mission interpreting chronic mercurialism at the mercury mine in Idria using Scopoli’s notes (35). Pintar was also the first Slovene who recognized the value of the Gerbec’s description of a complete atrio-ventricular block symptom, and his primacy at this discovery. Mušič’s suggestion to name the symptom as Gerbezius-Morgagni-Adams-Stokes was based on Pintar’s analysis of Gerbec’s work.

The essential contribution of Dr Pintar is his paleopathological work on the skeleton from a site near Bled (Slovenia). He was the first among the Slovenes to study diseases among Old Slavs. Together with anthropologists he came to new, valuable conclusions, showing the interaction of medical history, pathology, and anthropology.

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