Popular Health Education and Venereal Diseases in Croatia between Two World Wars

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The article presents the research of popular health education on venereal diseases in Croatia between the World Wars. In the interwar period, the traditional plain approach to popular health education was replaced with new, complex methods, which became the basis for the modern work in this field. New social medicine ideas and new health politics, as well as the new founded institutions such as the School of Public Health in Zagreb and different anti-venereal outpatient facilities, were crucial for changing popular health education after World War I. Based mostly on archival documents, this article explores popular health education as a vehicle for identification of attitudes and concepts within the medical community. Ambivalence in the perception of essential approaches towards popular health education is elaborated on the ground of controversies within prominent medical representatives. With the support of new technologies, public health methods in the interwar period matured in form and complexity. Despite various new methods, which made their way into different parts of everyday life, the subject matter of venereal diseases was treated through a limited number of methods due to the conservative attitudes of society, as well as resistance of many physicians.

Key words: Croatia; health education; schools, public health; sexually transmitted diseases

Influenced by social medicine ideas as well as the new movements in the field of public health, a new concept of popular health education was introduced on the territory of Croatia after World War I. In the immediate postwar period, health propaganda campaigns became an important instrument to effect health relief in the countries where the undernourished and impoverished population had become burdened by various infectious diseases. After these first health propaganda campaigns, a more complex process was initiated. It definitely replaced the traditional plain approach to popular health education with the new complex methods, which became the basis for the modern work in this field. The Health Section of the League of Nations played an important role in this change. It tried to internationalize public health by strongly supporting the collaboration between different governments and scientists. The Rockefeller Foundation decided to focus its work on popular health education as one of its priority tasks, especially in the first decade after World War I (1,2).

Due to the fact that various diseases at that time period were understood as a consequence of the social context, innovative approaches to their treatment were introduced. This included a variety of popular health education methods, which were promoted for the first time. Based upon the archival documents of the Croatian National Archives and the Archive Centre of the Rockefeller Foundation, this article explores the popular health methods in the sphere of venereal diseases, between the two World Wars. Such a model served as a vehicle for the identification of attitudes and concepts within the medical community. The ambivalence in the perception of popular health education, described in the article, will be elaborated on the ground of various controversies within the medical community.

Popular Health Education

In the period preceding World War I, popular health education in Croatia was reduced to occasional and isolated activities, such as lectures or exhibitions, most often initiated by enthusiastic individuals or townsfolk associations and directed to urban dwellers. The printed works were chiefly available to the narrow urban public, whereas the inhabitants of suburban and rural settlements, many of them illiterate, were deprived of any popular health education information. Most of the popular health education about sexually transmitted diseases in this period was deeply influenced by religious beliefs and related moral attitudes. An exception to this rule was one of the most productive authors of the period, Fran Gundrum Oriovčanin (1856-1919), a medical doctor and a writer, who in 1905 published the first edition and in 1914 the second edition of his popular health education book “Health Care of Sex life” (Zdravstvo spolnog života) that examined the anatomy and phys-
iology of sexual organs, sexuality, and venereal diseases. Gundrum’s pioneer work in the field of health promotion on venereal diseases and sexual behavior was based on the recent scientific knowledge such as the research of Richard von Kraft-Ebing (1840-1902) (3). Before World War I, A. Štampar (1888-1958), still a medical student, turned his attention to the problems of popular health education concerning sexual behaviour and venereal diseases (4).

Changes after World War I

The growing emphasis on venereal diseases in the post 1918 popular health education was a result of the development of the new public health politics and the new model of popular health education promoted by the Ministry of Public Health of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and the School of Public Health in Zagreb. The latter, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and strongly influenced by the American public health model, had a crucial impact on the popular health education in Croatia. The profound changes in the public health domain initiated by Andrija Štampar, the head of the Hygienic Department of the Ministry of Public Health, and inspired by the ideology of social medicine had a prime importance on increasing the awareness of venereal diseases in popular health education discussions and activities (5,6).

A range of new institutions administered by the Ministry of Public Health and spearheaded by the School of Public Health in Zagreb provided a frame for the intensive development of new popular health education: its working methods, the media it used, and the population it reached. While in the pre-War period issues connected with venereal diseases and sexuality had mostly been in the domain of the priests, teachers, and other laymen, or some enthusiastic physicians, in the post-War period popular health promotion became a part of a strict program. Within the School of Public Health, the duty of the Department was to organize lectures and exhibitions, and to publish popular health education publications on sexual hygiene and ethics for the upper grades of secondary schools (11). In Croatia, the Health Department of the Provincial Government (Zdravstveni odsjek zemaljske vlade), a remnant of the Austro-Hungarian administrative organization, with its subordinate Health Propaganda Section, developed an ambitious popular health education and propaganda activity. After the abolishment of the Health Department of the Provincial Government in 1924, the newly founded Institute for Social Medicine in Zagreb took over the popular health education domain. This Institute remained in charge of the popular health education until the founding of the School of Public Health in Zagreb in 1926. The School was founded with the money and in accordance with the principles of the Rockefeller Foundation (12).

One of the fundamental tasks of the School of Public Health was to provide theoretical and practical knowledge to the people. Within the School of Public Health, a Department for Social Medicine was established and further divided into the Divisions for Hygienic Propaganda, Division for the Instruction of People, Division for Village Improvement, and Division for Sanitary Engineering. All these divisions covered specific fields of popular health education and supervised subordinate field social medical institutions (13).

From 1920 to 1925, 250 various social medical institutions, including 50 outpatient facilities for venereal diseases, were established on the territory of the Kingdom (14). In the interwar period, outpatient facilities existed in the Croatian cities of Bjelovar, Brod na Savi, Varazdin, Virovitica, Vukovar, Nova Gradiška, Ogulin, Osijek, Pakrac, Sisak, Slunj, Čakovac, Sušak, Split, Šibenik, Dubrovnik, and Zagreb (15). Antivenereic outpatient facilities offered free medical treatment with the new drug salvarzan and also played an important role in the popular health education on venereal diseases (16). Additionally, other social medical institutions such as public health centers and medical clinics had to introduce the popular health education, especially if there were no nearby antivenereic outpatient facilities (17).

Health Politics and Institutions

In the period immediately after the foundation of the Ministry of Public Health of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in December 1918, the domain of popular health education was assigned to the Department for Racial, Public, and Social Hygiene. The duty of the Department was to organize lectures and exhibitions, and to publish popular health education publications on sexual hygiene and ethics for the upper grades of secondary schools (11). In Croatia, the Health Department of the Provincial Government (Zdravstveni odsjek zemaljske vlade), a remnant of the Austro-Hungarian administrative organization, with its subordinate Health Propaganda Section, developed an ambitious popular health education and propaganda activity. After the abolishment of the Health Department of the Provincial Government in 1924, the newly founded Institute for Social Medicine in Zagreb took over the popular health education domain. This Institute remained in charge of the popular health education until the founding of the School of Public Health in Zagreb in 1926. The School was founded with the money and in accordance with the principles of the Rockefeller Foundation (12).

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Legislation

In the early 1920s, the Ministry of Public Health prepared a draft of the National Popular Health Preservation Bill (Nacrt zakona o čuvanju narodnog zdravlja) in which popular education received much attention. Although the bill had not been accepted in its full extent, some parts of it became a foundation for later legal acts, such as the National Popular Health Education Decree (Uredba o zdravstvenom prosvjećivanju naroda) from 1928 (18,19). The Law on Venereal Diseases Prevention (Zakon o suzbijanju spolnih bolesti) from 1934 as well as the Rule Book for the execution of that law (Pravilnik za izvršenje Zakona o suzbijanju spolnih bolesti), regulated the extensive propaganda against venereal diseases (20,21). New legislative regulations defined the subjects that were to conduct popular health education work in the field, the ways in which it should be conducted, and the means that had to be used. The National Popular Health Education Decree determined that the newly founded institutions had to manage the entire popular health education on the territory over which they had jurisdiction (19).

On the basis of these reforms, popular health education became institutionally defined and strictly centralized. It became a constant in the public life in both rural and urban settings, and a compulsory task for the staff of not only social medicine but also other medical institutions. While the 1920s were the turbulent time of reforms, the 1930s, which had started with the retirement of Andrija Štampar in 1931 and the reorganization of the Ministry of Public Health at the same time, were the period of the status quo and even, in some areas, of decline of the new public health under the constant attack of physicians’ associations, as will be seen in the next section. To focus on the change in the health promotion of venereal diseases, the rest of the article will address the events of the 1920s.

Public Health and Practical Medicine on Venereal Diseases: Ideas and Conflicts

Under the influence of social medicine ideas, health education of the people was one of the fundamental methods to achieve the goal of prevention of the so-called social diseases. For Andrija Štampar, venereal diseases belonged together with tuberculosis and alcohol addiction in the group of social diseases, the spreading of which was increased by poverty and lack of education. He pointed out that these kinds of diseases had a particularly important influence on the national health (22). At that time there was an emphasis on the connection between the disease and sexually deviant behavior (Fig. 1).

Štampar emphasized the importance of education on venereal diseases, the so-called sexual pedagogy. He stressed the need to promote a set of character virtues in every individual, in other words the need for the character (moral) upbringing of the population (5), which was particularly associated with sexual topics. He emphasized that the knowledge of facts regarding venereal diseases could not replace the proper moral attitude, and he quoted the example of medical students who knew very well what venereal diseases were and how they were transmitted but were the first, according to statistics, to become afflicted by them (23). Many popular texts published at that time supported Štampar’s thesis and referred to the great responsibility of an individual regarding his or her own health and the health of the community (15,24,25). An important collaborator of Andrija Štampar, Ante Vuletić (1899-1977), a theoretician of popular health education and a dermatovenerologist, also believed that the absence of moral component in sexual education caused a completely reverse effect from the desired one (26).

While public health officials thought that venereal diseases required increased attention of doctors and that popular health education was of outmost importance for their prevention, the medical profession approached this topic with a certain caution. In the main Croatian medical journal of that time, Liječnički vjesnik, physicians debated whether venereal diseases and sexuality should be publicly discussed or not. Physicians close to A. Štampar and the official public health administration thought that popular education on venereal diseases was necessary and that it should be used as much as possible (27,38). On the other hand, there were others who were strongly against any public discussion of sexuality. For instance, doctor Jovan Barač, official in the Ministry of Social Welfare, wrote in 1919 that "... every attempt of introduction of sexual pedagogy in the countryside should, a priori, be rejected as harmful to our people (29).

Teaching about Venereal Diseases

Especially lively was the discussion regarding the extent to which the topic of venereal diseases should be present in public and whether the school children should hear about this topic at all. Doctor Barač supported the opinion that a mere mention of sexual organs and sexuality in the class would cause unnecessary excitement of pupils. This effect would be abso-
lutely undesired because the pedagogic concepts of that time saw the school as an institution that cared and protected the school youth from any opportunity that could excite sexual instinct. He believed that sexual pedagogy was not the most suitable method to fight venereal diseases because pupils would make sexual remarks and masturbate in the class (29). On the other hand, intense efforts took place to introduce popular education on the protection from venereal diseases to university students, every year immediately before the enrolment at all the universities. It was also proposed that lectures on venereal diseases be introduced as a part of a compulsory curriculum, together with general hygiene, starting from the 6th grade of elementary school when sexual drives become active (27).

Ambivalence among Physicians

Andrija Štampar and his followers advocated the opinion that a time was ripe to change the understanding of the role of medicine. According to them, medicine in the past used to have an exclusively curative character and it neglected prevention and its social aspects to the advantage of clannish privileges and paying patients. In contrast to that, Štampar stressed the importance of the active public role of physicians. Accordingly, a physician should be a folk educator who should not spend his time only in a clinic or a laboratory, distant and isolated from people, but who should act in the community where people lived and worked (14).

Although one may expect that representatives of the newly established medical specialty – dermatovenereology – took a prominent part in the new popular health promotion against sexually transmitted diseases, their involvement was ambivalent. First of all, private practitioners, including dermatovenereologists, saw Štampar’s new social medicine institutions – antivenereic outpatient facilities, which provided not only education and advice but also a free-of-charge treatment to the entire population – as a direct trespassing into their domain. The vision of the doctor as a state official meant a loss of their professional autonomy. That was completely opposite to the new concept of popular health education as well. New media, such as film and radio, and new working methods were introduced that aimed to increase the participation of the public and consequently influence not only the transfer of knowledge but also the evolution of hygienic habits and attitudes. Efforts were made to incorporate popular health education in every and each segment of public life, from school education to the use of free time (37).

Popular Health Education Methods

The development of technology and an intensified interest for propaganda, which came about during and after World War I, encouraged considerable changes in popular health education as well. New methods were introduced that aimed to increase the participation of the public and consequently influence not only the transfer of knowledge but also the evolution of hygienic habits and attitudes. Efforts were made to incorporate popular health education in every and each segment of public life, from school education to the use of free time (37).

Popular Health Education about Venereal Diseases in School Curricula

In the 1920s, an initiative from the physicians and health officials came to introduce hygiene instruction into the medical curriculum. This was followed by another initiative to introduce instruction on sexual hygiene and ethics to the older school pupils, which would provide an opportunity to discuss the topics missed in previous efforts. It was emphasized that the safest way to introduce popular education was through school (27,38). The Law on Folk Schools, which came into force in 1929, regulated the compulsory instruction in hygiene and physical education. Neither the Law on Folk Schools nor the Secondary and Collegiate Schools Law and the Teacher-training School Law precisely regulated the teaching on sexuality (39,40).

School textbooks didn’t mention themes connected with venereal diseases and sexuality or mentioned them only superficially. For example, a 4th grade hygiene textbook for secondary schools (Nauka o zdravlju, Higijena za IV razred srednji i njima sličnih škola) published in 1932, contained only a short remark on how external parts of urinary organs should be protected from injuries and impurity and that every expendable touch is harmful to one’s health, thus alluding to the harmfulness of masturbation. Infectious venereal diseases, instructed the textbook, such as gonorrhoea, cause inflammation of the mucous membrane of all parts of urinary organs and consequently a constriction of urethra. The textbook concluded with a vague remark that venereal diseases cause “other problems” as well (41). A more extensive treatment of venereal diseases may be found in a 1941 secondary school textbook “Learning about health” (Nauka o zdravlju) for the 3rd and 4th grade of secondary school that was published in the time of the so-called Independent State of Croatia. This book contains a chapter that examined syphilitic symptoms, ways of its transmission, and prophylactic measures against the disease. In the chapter on the urinary
organs care, it was again stated that external parts of urinary organs should be protected from injuries and impurity, and that any unnecessary touch was harmful to one's health (42).

The section above showed that neither did the legislation explicitly prescribe education on the matters related to sexuality for school children, nor did the textbooks contain much on these topics so teachers did not have sufficient material to lecture on. Still, it may be assumed that schoolteachers who taught hygiene in accordance with the new incentive of the Ministry of Public Health did address problems connected with venereal diseases and sexuality in general. How extensive was the treatment of these topics in schools that did not have school doctors and in courses for the illiterate, remains an open question. There are some records of active cooperation between local teachers and doctors. In a memorandum sent from the elementary school in Vrbovec to the School of Public Health in Zagreb in 1919, it is stated that one of the teachers gave a series of popular health education lectures on various topics, including venereal diseases (43). The preface of a popular health education booklet "Youth in a Fight for Life: Sexual Hygiene" (Mladez u borbi za zivot: seksualna higijena, Fig. 2) by Umberto Girometta (1883-1939), professor at the State Gymnasium in Split, states that the author gave several lectures on sexual hygiene to his gymnasium students in 1919. The lectures were on anatomy and physiology of sexual organs, nocturnal ejaculation, onanism, prostitution, and on venereal diseases — gonorrhea, syphilis, and soft chancre (44).

**Popular Health Education Lectures**

Popular health education lectures, which were held publicly on a regular basis to a wide population, also contained material on venereal diseases. These lectures were organized not only in city centers, as in the pre-war period, but also in rural areas, mostly in village schools, newly formed social-medicine institutions or in the open air. The preserved documentation of the Health Department for Croatia, Slavonia, and Medimurje confirms that lectures on venereal diseases were organized in the field work as early as 1920 (45). A memorandum sent from the local health administration of the city of Slunj to the Health Department states that in 1920 lectures on venereal diseases were held after the Holy Mass. The author of the memorandum believed that Sundays and church holidays, after the Holy Mass, were the most appropriate time for popular health education lectures and educational film screenings (46). Together with the expansion of lectures from cities into villages, popular health education lectures were also organized at work places, for example for factory workers, railway personnel, students of vocational schools, and soldiers (47,48).

**Film Screenings**

Popular health education lectures in the studied period were often supplemented with film screenings of popular health education character. Film screenings, especially in the villages, were very attractive and innovative. The mentioned archival documents of the Health Department of Croatia, Slavonia, and Medimurje, witness that the first film screenings on the topic of venereal diseases took place around 1921. The memorandum from October 26, 1921 sent by the Royal county district in the city of Našice to the Health Department, suggested sending a lecturer and a film on venereal diseases to the tannin factory of the city of Đurđevac (49). In 1921, cinematographic screenings on venereal diseases were also held in the cinemas of Union and Helios in Zagreb and accompanied by the lectures of a dermatoveneereologist Janko Thierry (1874-1938) (50). The memorandum sent in by a field doctor who reported on popular education on the territory of north-east of Croatia, stated that a lecture had been given on venereal diseases accompanied with a film screening in the small city of Novska. The event was so popular that a hundred people were left outside the overcrowded room that had admitted an audience of three hundred (51). Films on venereal diseases were usually screened separately for men and women (52).

It is important to emphasize that when the Institute for Social Medicine had been founded in 1924, it was immediately equipped with a film laboratory (53). In 1926, the film laboratory and the Institute for Social Medicine moved to the newly established School of Public Health. The laboratory purchased additional equipment and, by 1926, was capable of more complex film production tasks. In 1929, the School of Public Health Photo and Film Laboratory...
produced a popular health education film titled “Venereal Diseases” (Spolne bolesti), which was actually a variation of the earlier, foreign production films by the names of “Venereal Diseases” (Spolne bolesti), “Open Your Eyes” (Otvoři oči), “Syphilis” (Sifilis), and others. These films explained the occurrence, course, consequences, and ways of transmission and treatment of venereal diseases by drawings, pictures and shots of patients. In 1930, the Photo and Film Laboratory of the School produced a feature film “Sinners” (Grešnice) that did not deal with venereal diseases directly but explored the question of abortion as an important topic that affected sexual life. In 1933, the same laboratory produced a documentary “Endemic Syphilis” (Endemični sifilis), which also had a dramatized version by the name of „Ika’s Destiny“ (Ikina sudbina) (52).

Hygienic Exhibitions

Another, much more used way to educate the people on venereal diseases was hygienic exhibitions. Hygienic exhibitions had already been organized in the pre-war period, but in the 1920s they grew larger and more complex and were organized not only in big cities but also in the provinces. The 1924 medical and pharmaceutical exhibition on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Medical Association, in the Industrial Palace of the Zagreb Fair, included a section dedicated to venereal diseases (54). At the same time, an exhibition named “Mother and Child” (Majka i dijete) was organized in Zagreb by the City Child Outpatient Facility. Although the core of the exhibition was a lesson on childcare, it also displayed moulded objects and pictures of human development from conception to birth and on venereal diseases, especially on syphilis (55). The exhibition “Mother and Child” later toured a number of villages in the country. In the course of my research I found no records of separate exhibitions on venereal diseases on the territory of Croatia in the interwar period. It is only evident that within other exhibitions there were parts dedicated to sexuality and venereal diseases. Thus, for example, parts of the exhibitions on alcoholism or tuberculosis where dedicated to venereal diseases (56).

Popular Health Education Publishing

Printed publications such as books, manuals, and brochures were still an important media for discussing the subject matter connected with sexuality and venereal diseases although films and lectures increasingly gained significance. The advantages of books were that they were cheaper and the urban population had an ingrained habit of using various printed material for health advice. The analysis of the frequency of particular topics within popular health education publications gathered in the Croatian Medical Bibliography for the period between 1918 and 1940 shows that after the topics related to the health in general, the largest number of popular health education publications belonged to thematic clusters on venereal diseases, sexual hygiene, sexual ethics, and sexual education in general (57).

Figure 3. Title-page of a popular health education book The Peasant Reader on Health (Seljačka čitanka o zdravlju), by Ivan Haslinger, 1924.

One of the most famous and most popular health education books, “Peasant’s Reader on Health” (Seljačka čitanka o zdravlju), first published by the School of Public Health in Zagreb in 1930 and followed by the second edition in 1933, also examined the subject matter of venereal diseases. This book included a chapter titled “Diseases Which Come into the Human Body through Bottom Orifices” (Bolesti koje ulaze u ljudsko tijelo na donje otvore) discussing gonorrhea. The chapter “Diseases Which Come into the Human Body through Injured Skin” (Bolesti koje ulaze u ljudsko tijelo kroz povrijeđenu kožu), mentions syphilis together with other diseases transmitted in the same way (25).

Health Education Slogans

The interiors of medical institutions, as well as different public areas, usually displayed health promotion slogans. Although this method of health education was particularly popular in the interwar period, slogans related to the prevention and protection from venereal diseases were absent. Venereal diseases were also not the main topics of various public manifestations such as health parades, health days, health weeks, etc. There are also no records of radio shows on health education on venereal diseases (58).
Discussion

The new model of popular health education in the period between the two World Wars formulated itself within professional institutions and was implemented by a professional staff. By forming the network of institutions, including those that specialized for antivenereic protection and popular health education, an organized system was established which planned, organized and conducted popular health education and health propaganda activities. These institutions employed professionally trained personnel, such as physician-specialists for venereal diseases and physicians who were additionally trained at courses organized by the School of Public Health in Zagreb or by the Rockefeller fellowships in different European and American institutions (59). Therefore, in contrast to the pre-war period, popular health education on venereal diseases was implemented by professional personnel, which was capable of showing contemporary medical findings connected with the problem.

While the international medical community praised the work on preventive medicine as well as the health promotion in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, especially in the 1920s, it is interesting to note that the health promotion regarding venereal diseases was not at all an easy task (60). By analyzing the articles in Liječnički vjesnik in the period between the two World Wars, which contained reports from the Croatian Medical Association conferences as well as reports from the health administration, one may notice the problems that emerged in connection with the popular health education on venereal diseases (27-34). These problems were not only related to popular health education doctrines in general, but also to the attitudes of the society as a whole, attitudes of certain doctors, and of health administration when presenting to the public the topics connected with sexuality. The important influence of popular health education on venereal diseases caused a resistance of some practical physicians to the social medicine doctrine. The controversial issues were also whether the topic of venereal diseases should be discussed publicly, whether it was acceptable in the school environment, and if so, in what way, and who should teach it (15,27-29). Apart from the discussions, the official position argued strongly in favor of educating the whole population on venereal diseases. (16,18-21,26-28,35,51,61).

The preserved documents witness that this doctrine found a powerful response in practice and that popular health education programs conducted in this field dealt with the topics of venereal diseases. As the analysis of the Croatian Medical Bibliography from 1919 to 1941 shows, venereal diseases and problems of sex life were considerably present in the printed works of that time. Film screenings also played an important role. The projections were usually followed by public lectures. On the other hand, the subject matter of venereal diseases rarely appeared in popular health education media, which was strictly public. No separate exhibitions were organized on venereal diseases; furthermore, the topic of protection from venereal diseases was not treated in popular health education, slogans or in public manifestations. There are also no preserved records of health education posters on prevention and protection from venereal diseases displayed on public surfaces. The use of more complex methods, such as working in small groups or health promotion courses that required a more active participation of attendants, were not noted.

With the support of new technologies, public health methods in the interwar period matured in form and complexity. But despite of various new methods, which made their way into different parts of everyday life, the subject matter of venereal diseases was treated by a limited number of methods. In accordance with the conservative attitudes of the society as well as resistance of particular physicians, antivenereal popular health education of the interwar period opened up the problem but did not put the final touch to it.

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