



Searching for Virtues in Medicine

Biserka Belicza
(1942-2005)

*History is a hard core of interpretation,
surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts.*

Sir George Clark

In 1927, ten years after the Zagreb School of Medicine was founded, a history of medicine teaching program was introduced in the medical curriculum by internist Lujo Thaller. In subsequent decades, its development as an academic discipline continued, warranted by sufficient manpower. Lavoslav Glesinger succeeded Thaller, and Mirko Dražen Grmek joined him (1).

Despite its early start, education in medical history did not evolve smoothly. This continued in the early seventies, when Biserka Belicza joined the Institute for the History of Medicine within the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts as the first female member, and took over lecturing at the Medical School. It was a period of great scientific progress, which offered little understanding or appreciation for the history of medicine as a profession. Therefore, maintaining the obligation inherited from her predecessors was not an easy task. However, she managed boldly, and her career progressed rapidly. She became Director of the Division for the History of Medical Sciences of the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Sciences of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (CASA), and in 1986 she became Professor of the History of Medicine at the Zagreb University School of Medicine. Although the history of medicine course was often incompetently shifted or questioned on the administrative level, Professor

Belicza succeeded in securing its continuation and attracting newcomers to join up. I was one of them. From my beginnings until recently, teaching was the thin red line which linked us in our concepts, work, and philosophy. No matter how divergent our later paths, our dedication to conveying knowledge to future doctors and the possibility of influencing their profile always brought us together.

While preparing myself to teach History of Medicine at the Zagreb School of Medicine, I used to visit Professor Belicza's lectures and was always fascinated with the magic and extraordinary skill of her performance. It was usually a silent but sparkling atmosphere which she initiated, masterfully enlivening past periods in students' imagination. The program she insisted on did not consist of dry historical data to be memorized. To the contrary, it was formulated as dynamic and provocative territory with the purpose of developing critical thinking. Above all, she had the magic and convincing aura in catching students' attention, interest, and concentration. From 1985, she was engaged in the postgraduate teaching of Principles of the Methodology of Scientific Research at the Zagreb School of Medicine, and when the Osijek School of Medicine was established within J. J. Strossmayer University, she created the curriculum in medical history and ethics, and became the chair of both divisions. It was her influence and credit that encouraged many physicians in Croatia, familiarized with the humanities during their medical education, to propose history sessions within medical congresses and symposia,

where Professor Belicza's dignity and eloquence repeatedly directed attention to broader aspects of medicine, from history to bioethics.

She was occupied with a broad range of research interests. They were mostly carried out through her project on Croatian medical heritage which encompassed issues on the development of medical theory and practice in Croatia, research and scientific contribution of Croatian physicians, development of medical education, history of medical professions and institutions, medical and public health legislation, folk medicine, and deontological and bioethical aspects in medical research and practice. However, two areas were in her particular focus. Primarily, the project was aimed at promoting scientific historical approach to the issues presented with unconventional medicine and at stimulating further research on the national and international status of unconventional medicine. Within that activity, she took part in the Co-operation in Science and Technology project on Unconventional Medicine from 1997 as the Croatian delegate and national coordinator. Her dedication also extended to the bioethical sphere where she continuously warned that science cannot be *a priori* considered ethical and harmless. She held that medicine is the perfect medium for the practical implementation and evaluation of scientific ideas and technology. Such orientation directed her to address the questions of values, ideals, and standards, misconduct and fraud, plagiarism, and dishonesty in scientific research, and decision-making based upon the individual informed choices of scientists, researchers, and citizens. For that reason, she made every effort to ensure that medical ethics, mandatory information of the patient, informed consent, and other similar considerations are properly recognized and specified. Within the framework of those activities, she was president of the Committee of Biomedical Ethics for Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts' Department of Medical Sciences, and she served as the Croatian representative to UNESCO's International Bioethics Committee.

She used different media to convey her messages to the broader medical community. Among national medical journals, she mostly published in *Liječnički vjesnik*, and *Saopćenja/Medicus* (since the beginning of her career), and in the

early nineties when the *Croatian Medical Journal* (CMJ) was launched, she enthusiastically joined its editorial board as the Medical Humanities Section Editor. Her papers published in the CMJ dealt with the foundation of the Zagreb School of Medicine, public health issues, and aging (2-5). After the international conference on the History of Medicine in Medical Education – Retrospective and Prospective Status and Role in Europe, she took care that selected papers were published in the thematic issue of the journal in 1999.

Professor Belicza was active in national and international societies. She was an associate research member of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and a full member of the Croatian Academy of Medical Science, and vice president of the International Society for the History of Medicine.

Long before a person is old enough, he or she makes choices and forms value judgments, and every choice and value judgment reflects his or her character and expresses the capacity to deal with the world. Professor Belicza chose to focus on increasing global consciousness of the possible damaging impacts of science and technology, and on medicine in particular. The death of Professor Belicza on the March 24, 2005 unfortunately stopped her from raising any further questions of standards, morals, and honesty. Her ideas, endeavors, and legacy nevertheless influenced us all profoundly. We shall cherish that valuable accomplishment and persist in developing and impersonating them, along with her memory. History will do the rest.

Stella Fatović-Ferenčić

- 1 Vučak I. In memoriam Mirko Dražen Grmek (1924-2000). *Croat Med J.* 2000;41:213-7.
- 2 Belicza B. Foundation of the Zagreb School of Medicine. *Croat Med J.* 1992;33:163-79.
- 3 Belicza B. Croatian gerontology from the ancient times to the seventeenth century. *Croat Med J.* 1997;277-87.
- 4 Borovečki A, Belicza B, Orešković S. 75th anniversary of Andrija Stampar School of Public Health – what can we learn from our past for the future? *Croat Med J.* 2002;43:371-3.
- 5 Belicza B, Szabo A. Public health reforms and development of health service in the Đakovo sub-district and administrative county in the period 1850-1899. *Croat Med J.* 2000;41:81-95.