CONTRIBUTION OF DR. PETRU VASICI UNGUREANU TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION

Virgil Ciobanu¹, Corneluta Fira Mladinescu², Ovidiu Fira Mladinescu², Dan Ancusa³

INTRODUCTION

Health education can be considered one of the most powerful "weapons of public health". It is proven and it almost goes without saying that problems, both of individual and collective pathology, can be much easier and more efficiently handled if the population is prepared to face them, as compared to an ignorant one, dominated by mysticism and superstitions.

Analyzing the physician-patient relationship, we can observe that from chronological point of view, four questions and as much answers come up. During the first contact with the patient, this will ask the first question: what is wrong with me? The patient is demanding a diagnosis, and then the second question arises: why am I ill? This is what we call pathogenesis in medical terms, followed afterwards by the third question: what should I do? The patient demands a treatment. When he is about to leave, almost stereotypical, the fourth question will arise: what should I do in order to not get ill again? The answer consists in advices, suggestions, recommendations, which in reality represent public health notions.

There is no doubt that such discussions between physician and patient also took place thousands of years ago and the answers evolved during time, according to the development of the knowledge, in general and of the medicine, in particular.
Despite this, therapeutic percepts, hygienic prescriptions, recommendations, medical advices and maxims were passed by from one generation to another, all elements of traditional empiric medicine, which show that “health education is as old as medicine itself, at least regarding the popularization of prescriptions for a healthy life”.

Centuries ago, many physicians recognized the importance of sanitary health. Hippocrates pointed out “the importance of active cooperation of the population in the field of health” and he also mentioned that “the physician is the master of the medical art, and the patient should cooperate with him against the disease”. Hippocrates also wrote: “what characterizes a good physician is not only the fact to offer the best available treatment, but especially to encourage the patient to keep the spirit high until he is cured”.

In the III-th century, A. D., Quintus Serenus Samonicus published a writing called „Liber medicinalis”, a real dissertation about folk hygiene, comprising numerous advices and recommendations regarding health maintenance. Similarly, in some works of Arabic medicine, especially those of Avicena and Maimonide, we find numerous recommendations regarding the necessity for body care, for the regular practice of physical exercises, as well as hygiene rules and rules for the prevention of epidemic diseases.

Even in a 3000-year old writing the following statement was made: “The real physician does not treat only what is ill, but also what is not ill yet”.

We can speak about a deliberate action and a wide spread of culture, including the medical one, only after the advancement of the illuministic current. Illuminists foresaw a multilateral and complex education, where the knowledge of the human body, physical exercises, body care, natural alimentation and hardening of the body gained a big importance.

The spread of printings originating from works with encyclopedic character, together with the introduction of educational and dissemination actions of scientific knowledge, initiated in Europe the “Popularization current of medicine and especially of hygiene”.

One of the important representatives of mass sanitary educational actions was Cristoph Wilhelm Hufeland that published in 1805 his work “Macrobiotics”, a landmark in the sanitary education history of the population.

The creation of Hufeland is still nowadays a useful and necessary monument of mass sanitary culture, published in several editions, translated in several languages and disseminated in almost all European countries.

The first printings with sanitary educational content, disseminated in territories inhabited by Romanians and written in the Romanian language, are dated at the beginning of the 19-th century and were inspired and resembled to sanitary works published abroad.

We mention, between the writings with educational-sanitary content of this epoch, the work of doctor Nicolae Kiriacopol from Roman called „Twelve teachings useful to pregnant women, in case of birth, after birth, for the way to watch children, those little children and their diseases” printed in 1827; the book of Episcopescu Stefan with the title “Health mirror” published in 1829, and the publication of Cuciureanu Gh. „Advices for Moldavian peasants in case of cholera” printed in 1847 in Iasi.

The person, who should be considered the real creator of the work in the field of health education, in an organized, systematic and scientific matter, was without any doubt doctor Pavel Vasici Ungureanu (1806 – 1881) from Banat. As a humanist, illuminist and a multilateral cultural personality, conscious of the creative effervescence of the epoch, he contributed to the elaboration of numerous works, not only about sanitary education, but also about the popularization of medical sciences, in particular and of sciences, in general.

His major work is represented by the translation in the Romanian language of Hufeland’s Macrobiotics. The title of the translation is: “Macrobiotics or the art to prolong life”. The work was published in the period 1844-1845 in Brasov and comprises two volumes, representing the translation of the fifth edition published in 1825.

When addressing to the reader, Vasici says: “I am putting Macrobiotics or the art to live in front of you, written after the famous doctor Hufeland. This book became so beautiful, so that none of the nations could ignore it, from all that wanted to take part to popular culture”.

Vasici was not doing just a simple translation; he tried to adapt the work to the necessities of the Romanians that means he completed the book with observations from his own experience. In this regard the translator mentions: “I took much trouble in creating this book, very useful and priceless, so popular that it is understandable for all the Romanian public and so that it fulfills its purpose. I fully followed the author in its translation, but I added some things that I considered were missing”.

Personal contributions are inserted as footnotes, all having the mention: “Translator’s observation” or “Translator’s note”. Besides this note, Vasici sometimes shorted the original text, especially when
examples from other countries were mentioned, adding examples from Transylvania and Banat or sometimes introducing new data.

For example, as a footnote that comprises entirely the pages 70-80 of the second volume, Vasici details the history of the jennerian vaccination, describing Jenner's experiences and observations. He mentions the benefits of vaccination thereby combating, based on logical arguments, the skeptics that did not believe in its efficiency and he appeals to the conscience and the responsibility of the parents. The epidemiologist Vasici, that fixed the fight against transmitted diseases among the purposes of his life, renders a beautiful homage to the discoverer of the vaccine against smallpox by writing: “And like these, due to researches made all over the earth, the power of prophylactic vaccination against smallpox was proved in millions of people and it remains the immortal merit of Jenner, both in medicine history as well as in the history of human culture”.

Already during the time he was studying in the university Vasici showed concerns regarding sanitary education and the popularization of medical knowledge. In his last year at the university he published the paper “Anthropology or the short knowledge about the human and his features” (Buda 1830) and in the year of his graduation he published “Dietetica” (Buda 1831).

It is worth to mention, that in Vasici's times, the term anthropology referred to anatomy and physiology, in other words to that knowledge about the structure of the human body and his functions, in contrast to the meaning attributed today. Anthropology is the first book of this kind that popularizes in the Romanian language terms of anatomy and physiology. In that phase of the development of Romanian medicine, when the national body structures were created and the Romanian medical terminology was formed, especially in Moldavia and Muntenia, Romanian physicians used foreign models or inspired themselves from works that where published in developed countries. Thus, Kretulescu used Cruveilhier’s work in the elaboration of his anatomy textbook and Polizu used the physiology of the German Budge in the preparation of his physiological notes. In the same way, the student Vasici used doctor Schardann’s lectures, his anatomy professor, when he was writing Anthropology. Otherwise, in the foreword, Vasici confesses: “all these are written according to D. Schardann’s lectures, doctor in medicine in this university of anatomy and physiology, the highest among the professors and also my immortal former teacher”.2

The majority of commentators consider Vasici’s “Anthropology” a popularization work, but regarding the year it was published and the systematic grouping of the chapters, that mainly correspond to some university lessons, the book can be considered the first anatomy lecture written in Romanian.3

“Dietetica” published in 1831 in Buda is based on the work of Hungarian physicians, professors at the Medicine Faculty in Pesta. In the foreword Vasici shows that he wrote it in the respite offered by his university studies and that he was inspired by the writings of his professors “because do not get rid of this useful teaching and of the needs, I put all my effort that my scholastic works permitted to compose this booklet, extracting from the whole medicine, according to the principals of many famous men in these works, and especially of my immortal teachers”.

In the period of his life that he spend in Brasov, being the director of the Timis quarantine (near Predeal) between 1836 and 1850 and then by occupying different positions until 1859, he published numerous popularization articles about medical-sanitary knowledge, comprising extremely varied domains, in almost all newspapers and magazines of the time. Particularly, he published numerous articles in “Transylvania” that was printed in Brasov, in the “Paper for mind, heart and culture” and in the “Transylvanian Gazette”, where he was actively involved in their foundation and where he was a collaborator for many years. During the time he was the editor of the “Romanian Telegraph” in Sibiu, he was also a collaborator and published numerous articles.

Besides sanitary and medial problems Vasici gave a special attention to the education and to the popularization of natural sciences. He considered that the teachers were the deciding factor in the process of culture rising among the peasants, which explains his close collaboration with them.

But Vasici went beyond the limits of medicine and hygiene by publishing numerous economical articles mostly in the “Romanian Telegraph”, where he emphasized the importance of agriculture development in Romania based on agriculture schools and associations.4 He wrote popularly about gardening and he combined hygiene propaganda with interesting pedagogy and Romanian school organization studies. Therefore, in 1867 he published in Sibiu “Practical knowledge about gardens and their cultivation”, comprising 117 pages.

In 1869 he retires and returns to Timisoara, the city he will never leave again until his death in 1881. Here, in Timisoara, he continues his activity with the same assiduity and tenancy, by publishing in 1870 both
“The catechism of health” and “The anthropological catechism” and in 1877 “Diphtheria and the struggle against it”.

The two catechisms were both written for elementary school children and they comprise anatomy, physiology and hygiene concepts organized in an easy understandable questionnaire with questions and answers that Vasici considered to be necessary for children to know, even at a tender age. And to those who might think that such notions would be difficult to learn, he answers: “I just observed that children learn today, with a remarkable dexterity, totally abstract and useless things and thus very difficult, so there is no doubt that they can assimilate these knowledge as well, especially since these are concrete notions”.

The necessity and probably the success of these catechisms were confirmed by the fact that in 1872, just two years after they were published, doctor Becsi Gedeon, director of the hospital in Timisoara, published in German a work similar to Vasici’s catechism.

But his activity in the field of education and popularization of medical and sanitary notions did not stop there. As founder and animator of the journal “Hygiene and school, paper for health, education and instruction” published between 1876 and 1878 in Timisoara and Gherla, Vasici presented multiple and complex aspects of hygiene, as well as in a series of articles published in the journals: “The light” and “The bee”.

For the first time in our country he criticizes very insistently, but also with a lot of competence, the hygienic deficiencies found in schools and the serious alimentation deficits encountered in the population at that time, showing the necessity for medical physical culture and insisting on individual hygiene notions.

He understood and that reveals Vasici’s superiority, that health protection has to belong to everybody and that this can be accomplished only by their active participation that is conditioned by the continuous increase of the sanitary cultural standards in the population. For him, the key factor of sanitary education was represented by the school. This explains the title of the journal “Hygiene and school” and his preoccupations, so well sustained and documented, regarding the continuous improvement of the educational process.

In 1879, due to his exceptional contributions in the field of science and culture, he was elected member of the Romanian Academy; the topic of his welcome speech was “Vegetarianism or nutrition from historical, sanitary, dietetically, economical and social point of view”.

REFERENCES

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