

The Castelltort paupers' hospital in Cervera: neurological and general care in the late 18th century

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ABSTRACT

Very little information is to be found about the care provided by paupers' hospitals in the 17th and 18th centuries. This article presents a review of the evolution and activity of the Castelltort paupers' hospital in Cervera, an inland town in Catalonia. We also analyse the hospital's admission and discharge records during that period. Although the hospital was funded primarily by donations, it also received support from the local government. Most of its patients suffered from infections or nutritional deficiencies. There were very few neurological diagnoses; of the few we found, most are descriptive and correspond to pain and headache. Mortality rates were very high among the few patients hospitalised due to stroke.

KEYWORDS

18th century; local hospital; paupers' hospital, Cervera, stroke, neurological disease.

Introduction

Very little is known about 17th and 18th century hospital care,¹ and what we do know only applies to large or medium-sized cities.^{2,3,4} The literature contains no descriptions of how medical care was provided in small towns or the level of neurological care that would have been offered in this setting. In this article, we review the role and development of Hospital de Castelltort, a paupers' hospital in Cervera which was founded in the Middle Ages. We also examine the volume of neurological patients attended after the War of the Spanish Succession. This hospital played a part which could be compared to that of a modern local hospital if we leave aside a few major differences.

Historiography and sources

This article makes use of sources kept in the Hospital de Castelltort records in Cervera's historical archive (Arxiu Històric de Cervera, AHC). Additional AHC sources consulted include minutes of municipal council meetings, municipal records, the notarial record, the Josep Bargués

collection, the University records, and the Duran i Sampere legacy collection. We also consulted the following historical archives corresponding to larger geographical areas: Arxiu Històric Comarcal de Tàrraga, Arxiu Històric Comarcal d'Igualada, Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Archivo Histórico Nacional de Madrid, Arxiu Parroquial de Cervera, Arxiu Històric de Protocols de Barcelona, and Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya (Fons Moixó). All sources were analysed by the authors themselves. We also examined references mentioning Cervera, Catalonia, and 17th or 18th century healthcare.

Cervera's care system and administrative and social situation prior to the *Nueva Planta* Decree

The town of Cervera, located between Barcelona and Lleida, was incorporated as a city by order of the Catalan Courts in 1702, when newly-crowned King Philip V pledged to uphold the Catalan Charters and the Courts swore their loyalty in turn. Previously, in September 1701, Philip V visited Cervera, where waving crowds gave him a warm welcome and followed him to the city gate upon his departure. One account of his visit is kept

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in the city's historical archive; in it, farmer Josep Bargués describes the events of the day.⁵ The visit was also mentioned by apothecary Josep Corts⁶ in an unpublished manuscript which would later be cited by the historian Durán Sanpere.⁷ Cervera, located in the Segarra district of the modern-day province of Lleida, was a royal dependency, meaning that it was not under the protection of any other noble family, military order, or church authority. This status, which was quite uncommon in modern Catalan history (less than 6% of cities in the Segarra district in the early 18th century were royal dependencies), granted its citizens and governors a degree of independence beyond that of other cities. Its constitution was based on a declaration of Privileges (*Privilegis*), a charter sworn by the crown which guaranteed the city's rights.⁸ It was governed by four representatives or *paers* who were chosen using a system called *sac e sort*: the names of various heads of local families were placed in four different sacks, and one name was drawn from each of the sacks to determine who would be *paer*. These four *paers* would govern together during a year, after which the process was repeated. In Cervera, this system enabled representation on the municipal government level for every family living in the town. The municipal government also included a standing council (*Consell ordinari*) and a special council of 24 members (*Consell de Vint-i-quatrena*) resembling the hundred-member *Consell de Cent* in Barcelona. As mentioned above, *paers* were chosen by a random drawing of names from different sacks. The lists of names were drawn up to include people of different social standings.⁹

After the town's declaration of Privileges in 1698, the list for the first bag contained 12 names representing the first guild category. The second bag contained 12 names in the first guild category and 9 names representing artist guilds. The third bag included 6 names from the artist guilds and 9 from the third guild category. The fourth bag contained 15 names from the fourth guild category.¹⁰ Medical doctors (and doctors of law) belonged to the first guild category, while surgeons and barbers belonged to artist guilds classified in the second category. Labourers and artisans were placed in either the third or the fourth category, depending in theory on whether or not they could read. Prior to 1698, the city used a mixed election system with a lottery of names chosen by *paers* and outgoing members of the council. After 1698, in any case, the system ensured that two of the four *paers* would be labourers or artisans. Within

the royal administration, Cervera was the capital city of its *Vegueria*, or feudal jurisdiction.

The city underwent significant changes beginning in the 16th century. Its demographic features were modified by an influx of citizens who had left other areas controlled by the Catalan nobility in order to escape the lack of legal guarantees¹¹ or areas affected by banditry. Other changes were caused by economic development due to agriculture (especially wine-growing), the emergence of more specialised trades, and even the centralisation of the tobacco trade in Catalonia. The population was also becoming more urban, since nobles preferred living in cities although they still maintained their country estates. Furthermore, there were fewer of the barriers that had impeded growth in the past, such as wars and plague epidemics.¹² Cervera grew more quickly than other royal dependencies, probably because of the degree of protection against bandits offered by the presence of its *somatens*, community watches a hundred men strong. In addition, the nobility of Segarra was not as powerful as in other areas; recall that some historians report that nobles colluded with groups of bandits in order to recover the taxes they had paid to the Crown. Bandit raids waned throughout the 17th century for three reasons: the campaign by the Duke of Alburquerque (1616-1619), viceroy of Catalonia; effects of the plague; and the Catalan Revolt (*Guerra dels Segadors*),¹³ a peasant uprising against the nobility.

To provide an idea of its population, Cervera was described in 1687 as having 540 hearths,¹⁴ which would indicate some 3200 inhabitants. Cervera's social distribution, counting heads of families, was as follows: 13 noblemen, 32 rope-makers, 16 shoemakers, 33 weavers, 8 tailors, 8 silk merchants, 10 construction workers, 7 leather workers, 9 merchants, 7 shopkeepers, 7 notaries public, 5 doctors, 5 surgeons, 3 apothecaries, 4 silversmiths, and 2 sculptors, with all other heads of household listed as farmers and farm-labourers.

Healthcare in Cervera

Two events seem to indicate that Cervera enjoyed a reputation as a healthy city compared to the rest of Catalonia in the 15th century. In 1419, when the Queen consort of Aragon wished to attend a celebration in Cervera, court physician Dr Antoni Ricart attested to the city's good sanitary conditions.¹⁵ In 1476, the Catalan court was moved to Cervera, where health conditions were better

than those in Barcelona, during an outbreak of the plague. However, this does not mean that the city's history remained free from epidemics. Leaving Hospital de Castellort aside, medical care in Cervera had been provided since medieval times by organisations resembling those found in other similar towns.¹⁶⁻²⁰ In Cervera, these organisations were as follows: *a*) the Jewish medical school, located in Call dels Jueus in the Middle Ages, which trained such doctors as Bonanasch Alfaquim (1370), Sustam Deslogar (1385), Abram des Portell (1399), Samuel de Lunell (1417), Bonafos Abraham (1440), and Juceff and Samuel Cavaller (1470). *b*) Hospital de Santa Magdalena, founded by bequest of Joan de l'Hospital and his wife, who left two houses to shelter the poor, plus the church of Santa Magdalena (1235), a complex run by monks. By the late 14th century, this complex had been transformed into a hospital for lepers, and it received monetary support for its activities from the *paers*. Although abandoned in the mid-15th century, it was reopened during plague epidemics in the 15th and 16th centuries to house the sick. *c*) Hospital de les Onze Mil Verges, located on the road to Oluges and founded in 1328 by Doménech Aguilar and his wife Guillermina. This institution was really more of a hospice than a hospital during the 14th and part of the 15th centuries. *d*) Houses serving as clinics to care for the sick, one of which was located in the Plaça Major, another in Carrer de la Vall, and a third in Carrer de Sant Antoni. An inventory of medieval hospitals in Catalonia²¹ lists the following institutions in Cervera: Hospital Santa Magdalena, Hospital de San Antoni de Viana, Hospital de Sant Joan de Jerusalem, Hospital de les Onze Mil Verges, and of course, Hospital de Castellort. However, some of these hospitals had already vanished by the 15th century.

One important event in the city's history was the founding of the University of Cervera, the first modern university in Catalonia and, in fact, the only one until the late 18th century.²² Prior to this, universities followed the medieval model of the *studia generalia*, which would correspond more closely to liberal arts or humanistic colleges. The university, which was probably granted to Cervera as a reward for the town's loyalty to Philip V during the War of the Spanish Succession, was soon filled with professors and students in all areas of study, including medicine.²³ There was no university hospital at the time, but there was a centre named Hospital de Estudiantes Pobres (also known as Hospital del Estudio) which occupied a few houses near

the university; no separate building for that institution was ever constructed. Lack of a teaching hospital was one of weak points of the medical school, which was said to present only theoretical information.^{24, 25} Some of the first professors of medicine in Cervera included Dr Jaume de Arán from Lleida, Dr Francesc Case from Tàrraga, and Dr Francesc Oliver from Guardiola.²⁶ Its first graduates included Dr Antoni de Gimbernat from Cambrils, a prestigious surgeon who worked at Hospital Clínico San Carlos in Madrid; Dr Josep Masdevall, epidemiologist to the Court; and Francesc Junoy, head surgeon at Hospital de la Santa Creu in Barcelona.²⁷

Hospital de Castellort

The history of the hospital has been studied in detail by historian Josep Llobet Portella.²⁸ The institution was founded by bequest of Berenguer of Castellort who left the building in his will. An original copy of the will, dated 3 April 1389, is kept in Cervera's historical archive in the collection corresponding to the hospital.²⁹ The will stated that the house in Carrer Major in Cervera was to be refitted as a hospital, and that beds and bedclothes would be brought from the deceased's house in Barcelona to supplement those already found in the house in Cervera. The merchant also left 500 Barcelonese pounds for the purchase of land adjacent to the house and the construction of a chapel dedicated to the Holy Trinity and Saint Honoratus. Berenguer of Castellort was a resident of Cervera, a member of its municipal council in 1356,³⁰ and procurer for Santa Caridad, the city's charitable institution. He made his will in Cervera on 3 April 1389 and died in Barcelona on 4 October of the same year. His wish was to be entombed in the chapel dedicated to Saint James in Santa Maria parish church in Cervera, and in 1392, his remains were accordingly moved from Barcelona to Cervera.²³ The will also established that the hospital would be directed by a board composed of members of the Cervera chapter of the Brotherhood of Saint Francis. Three priests would serve as the hospitals' administrators and present their accounts yearly. The hospital was declared to be Berenguer of Castellort's residuary beneficiary, and its mission would be to care for and feed all poor people seeking shelter.²⁴ The hospital occupied a number of buildings, first in the Capcorral district, followed by the Santa Clara Monastery, then a house owned by the town council in

Plaça de Santa Anna, and lastly, the building inaugurated in 1733 where it remains to this day. The hospital was financed initially with money left by Berenguer de Castelltort in his will. At a later date, it received substantial sums of money from citizens through collections taken up in the streets and in churches, charitable events, and bequests. It also gathered funds through taxes and canons, collections by the bishopric, donations from municipal councils in nearby towns, and so on. It seems that the townsfolk were very much involved in supporting their hospital, based on how frequently they remembered it in their wills. The town council's support for the hospital prior to the Bourbon ascendancy (1683) was considerable. The council provided funds for the purpose of sustaining the hospital's activities and hiring sufficient doctors for the needs of the population.³¹

Types of neurological disease mentioned in admission and discharge records.

The hospital records maintained by Segarra's historical archive include the register of admissions and discharges³² which covers incomplete periods between the late 18th century and early 19th century. The most common diagnoses cited infectious disease, although many discharge reports only offered descriptive information, such as chronic illness, prolonged illness, weakness, emaciation, or unspecified process resulting in death. The most commonly-diagnosed infectious diseases included putrid fever, 'fever' as a generic diagnosis, malignant fever, tertian fever, quartan fever, erysipelas, trachoma, scabies, mumps, pneumonia, and colds. Other common diagnoses included asthmatic disease, scurvy, surgical illness, wounds, inflammation, burns, ulcers, vomiting, tumours in general, process resulting in death, dropsy, and water retention.

Diagnoses that we today would classify as neurological were very scarce. They included headache; pain (understood to include types of neuralgia) such as neck pain, side pain, chest pain, heart pain, arm pain, foot pain, hand pain, or simply 'pain'; stroke; and deficiencies provoking neurological symptoms, such as scurvy. In some cases, the records indicate the length of the hospital stay. Hospitalisation times for headache, for example, ranged from a few days to nearly a month (6 to 26 days). The very few recorded cases of stroke all resulted in death.

Discussion

Hospitals that provided services to the poor in the 17th century were typically religious institutions.^{33,34} Their activities had more to do with a spiritual calling³⁵ than with larger social or administrative needs, although such needs were recognised in hospitals located in major cities.^{36,37} While the hospital in Cervera was founded because of a charitable donation, it soon won the support of the local government, which ensured the presence of doctors in the community and dedicated its resources to guaranteeing the hospital's continuity.³¹ At the same time, the hospital also received public and private donations and bequests from peoples' wills. The structure of the municipal council, whose members were chosen by drawing names from sacks, may have to do with the social support for the hospital and local interest in social welfare and medicine. In fact, the doctors hired by the town council had an obligation to care for the poor.

The hospital, which is still standing today, provided care to paupers, meaning that a high percentage of its patients suffered from infectious diseases and nutritional deficiencies, and they were probably better fed while in hospital.³⁸ Several patients were diagnosed with stroke (*feridura* in Catalan), and this is surprising when we consider that the entity was just beginning to be understood in the 17th century.³⁹ Although Arboix et al.⁴⁰ and Martí-Vilalta et al.⁴¹ have addressed the topic of stroke care in Catalonia in the past 200 years, we found no accounts of stroke diagnosis in the 18th century. In light of the incidence rates for stroke today, the low number of cases found here seems to suggest that stroke patients were not typically hospitalised.

Most of the diagnoses, such as pain and headache, were descriptive, and patients' hospital stays were generally prolonged. This indicates that diagnoses were probably not aetiological, even considering those aetiologies understood at the time. Although neurological patients were hospitalised for extended periods of time, their mortality rates were not high, except in the case of stroke patients, all of whom died.

Hospital de Castelltort in Cervera is probably a representative example of a paupers' hospital in a small town in which most illness was infectious or deficiency-related rather than neurological. Descriptions of the diseases were recorded and we find few cases of stroke, probably because most patients with stroke were never admitted. Few diagnoses indicated disease aetiology. While the

section of the records we studied corresponds to the late 18th century, tendencies were probably comparable to those in previous decades. Considering that there were no other hospital facilities in the city, it is logical to believe that most medical care was provided in patients' homes. The founding of the University of Cervera's medical school did not seem to change the way medical care was provided in the town.

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