

# Valetta 2018: Medical heritage

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In the wake of the 1565 Great Siege, the Order of the Hospital of Saint John committed itself to building a new fortified city on the peninsula straddling the two harbours. After the foundation stone of the city was laid on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1566, the work on *Valletta Humillissima* progressed without interruption and the Convent formally transferred its abode from *Birgu Vittoriosa* to the new city on the 18<sup>th</sup> March 1571. The administrative move required also the development of plans to build a new *Sacra Infermeria* in the new city for the eventual transfer of the medical services so essential to the original *raison d'être* of the Order. Building works on the hospital commenced in 1574 and completed four years later. The Valletta *Sacra Infermeria*, supplied by a dedicated hospital pharmacy, was managed by defined regulations laid down and codified by the Chapter-General of the Order in 1588.<sup>1</sup> In 1725, the past regulations were collected and published in one volume entitled “*Notizia della Sacra Infermeria, e della carica delli Commissari delle Poveri Inferme*”.<sup>2</sup> These latter regulations covered all facets of health care services provided by the Order. A copy of the hospital regulations was hung up in the hospital for the guidance of the patients in order that the rules of the institution could be more surely and exactly observed. The hospital doors were open to all, except “to assassins, to such as pillage the country by night, to incendiaries, to sodomites, to conspirators, nor to robbers.

Such likewise as are guilty of murdering anybody by ambush, wilfully in cold blood, treacherously, or by poison; the servants too of our brothers, such as have attempted the lives of our brothers, judges, or ministers of justice, persons that are in debt, such as have committed crimes within the infirmary itself, or designedly in hopes of finding sanctuary there, false witnesses, sacrilegious persons, robbers on the highway.” The same Regulations confirmed “that the hospital of the infirmary may be always free and open to receive sick persons, as well as subjects of the orders, as others that shall repair thither to be cured of their diseases, according to its ancient and laudable custom.”<sup>1</sup> The Valletta *Sacra Infermeria* was to enjoy a prominent reputation throughout the subsequent centuries with several visitors commenting favourably on the care and hospitality given to its inmates irrespective of creed and social status.

The *Sacra Infermeria* however only catered for males, having no provisions for females. To cover for the needs of the female gender, the philanthropic-minded lady Catherina Scarpi opened a small house for the reception of sick women known as *Santa Maria della Scala*. In 1625, the establishment was transferred to a new building sited in the vicinity of the *Sacra Infermeria*. Financial subsistence by the Order’s Treasury became necessary for the continuance of the establishment, and the management of the establishment for female patients, now called the *Casetta delle donne*, was totally taken over by the Order after Scarpi’s death in 1655. The management of the establishment was regulated by the same rules and regulations applicable to the *Sacra Infermeria* to ensure that in the care of the infirm, everything must be done for their comfort and treatment.<sup>3</sup>

The Valletta *Sacra Infermeria* and *Casetta delle donne* also had provisions to receive and care for mentally infirm individuals. At the *Sacra Infermeria*, the manageable patients were kept in a room especially reserved for them where they were bound and chained to their beds. If these became

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unmanageable and dangerous to themselves and others, they were transferred to the basement ward of the *Infermeria*. Here they were restrained by pinioning, and by chaining their arms and at times even their legs to the walls of the chamber.<sup>2,4</sup> The total number of monthly inmates in the *Sacra Infermeria* ward for the mentally infirm amounted to 18 individuals during the period covering 1<sup>st</sup> May 1787 to 30<sup>th</sup> April 1789.<sup>5</sup> At the *Casetta delle donne*, mentally infirm female patients after 1725 were cared for in two rooms reserved for them. This accommodation was augmented in 1783 by annexing an adjacent building.<sup>3</sup> In 1816, both male and female mentally infirm patients were transferred to the *Casa di Carita`* or *Ospizio* at Floriana. During the latter years of the Order's rule in Malta, the cost of running the *Sagr' Ospedale* and the *Ospedale delle Donne* amounted to about 8.0% of the total expenditure of the Order, with the mean annual expenditure during this seven-year period amounting to about 93500 *scudi*.<sup>6</sup>

The Valletta *Sacra Infermeria* further provided health care services to ill galley slaves in the Great Magazine Ward situated below street level after these were transferred from their previous facility in Birgu during the plague epidemic of 1592. Land-bound slaves however as yet had no provisions for care in case of illness. By 1631, an *Infermeria delle Schiavi* was therefore set up in the Slave Prison at Valletta catering for publicly and privately-owned land-bound slaves. A set of regulations to manage the *Infermeria delle Schiavi* was issued on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1631 "so that the sick may not die for want of care and from miserable living".<sup>7</sup>

Medical services in Valletta were not simply restricted to hospital services but also extended to the community either in the form of an extension of the services provided by the *Sacra Infermeria* or in private practice system. The 1631 Hospital Regulations made provision for the issuing of pittance and medicines from the Hospital stores "to poor women, upon the prescription of physicians that have salaries out of the treasury, or from the people, signed by one of the commissaries deputed to visit the poor sick." Remedies and visits by medical personnel were also to be furnished "gratis to the monasteries of St. Ursula, the penitent sisters of the city Valletta, and the capuchins." All

pittances given out of the infirmary to poor sick women were to be given in money rather than victuals.<sup>8</sup> Similar provisions were made in the 1725 Regulations whereby the *Sacra Infermeria* dispensary supplied food, medication and a daily pittance to the blind, the leprous, the scrofulous, and the poor incurables of the city. The dispensary also provided to members of the religious orders and the institutional homes for girls and women penitents. Assistance in the form of accommodation and allowance was also given to all pilgrims.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Order maintained a district nursing service covering the Grand Harbour region for the care of the sick poor in the community. This service was regulated by the *Regolamento per le Povere Inferme di Malta* published as a supplement to the *Sacra Infermeria* Regulations in 1725. Two Knights of the Order, termed "Commissioners of the Sick Poor", were deputed as supervisors to enable the provision to "many poor incurables, who are incapable of providing for themselves, with daily alms, and distribute to others, in addition to what remains in the caldrons, a large quantity of soup and vermicelli, which is purposely cooked each day; also a large number of old sheets and coverlets are given to poor women, and many bandages and crutches to cripples".<sup>2</sup> The Commissioners had the assistance of four "elderly" women, known as *Pitanziere*, in their daily rounds. These were to ensure that the supplies arrived to the sick poor, to see that the physicians appointed to visit them attended to their duties, and that the patients received the proper food and medicines. Five physicians and five surgeons were occupied with this duty, two of each for Valletta and the remainder for the other towns around the Harbour region. The annual cost of this community service amounted to about 39,000 *scudi*.<sup>9</sup>

The free hospital and community medical services made available in Valletta by the Order was augmented by a private health service that covered medical and surgical treatment and apothecary services. In 1782, six private-run apothecary shops serviced the community residing in Valletta.<sup>3</sup> Besides the medical and surgical personnel serving in the Order's hospitals in Valletta, a number of practitioners were providing a private practice service to Valletta residents [*vide* table below].<sup>10</sup>

*Table 1: Medical & paramedical personnel resident in Valletta - 1766*

Professional category	Hospital	District service	Private practice	Naval service	Unknown
Physicians	10	1	1	-	3
Surgeons	5	-	6	5	-
Barberotti	10	-	4	4	-
Insangnatori	2	-	5	-	-
Fa occhiali	-	-	1	-	-
Student barberotti	2	-	-	-	-
Apothecaries	4	-	2	-	4
"Nurses"	24	-	-	-	-

The Valletta *Sacra Infermera* also played an important role in medical education. Those individuals aspiring to become surgeons generally started their career as barber-surgeons (*barberotti*) in the *Sacra Infermeria* and after proof of competence they became Junior Surgeons (*Prattici*). These trainees were subsequently encouraged to proceed abroad to further their surgical training. Attempts at introducing formal medical education in the Maltese Islands can be dated to the establishment of the *Scuola di Medicina e Chirurgia* set up at the *Sacra Infermeria* by Grandmaster Nicholas Cottoner on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1676. Instruction in theoretical anatomy and surgery, and later in the surgical aspects of physiology, pathology, semiotics, hygiene and therapeutics, was given to the barber-surgeons of the *Sacra Infermeria* and to all other youths who aspired to join the surgical profession provided that they could read and write. By 1682 the course in surgery lasted ten years. In 1716 a dissection room was built in the cemetery of the *Sacra Infermeria* and the necessary instruments were obtained from Paris. A set of rules governing the teaching of surgery and anatomy were published in December 1729 and revised in 1739.<sup>3</sup>

In 1768, Grandmaster Pinto requested authorisation from Pope Clement XIV to appropriate the *Collegium Melitense* in Valletta owned by the expelled Society of Jesuits to set up the *Pubblica Universita` di Studi Generali*. The Papal brief *Sedula Romani Pontific* was given on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 1769 and the decree constituting the University was signed by Grandmaster Pinto on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1769. The institution comprised two sections: a "*Collegium*" aimed at elementary and secondary education, and a "*Universitas*" to confer doctoral degrees. The *Collegio Medico* was

set up on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 1771 and was managed by the *Accademia dei Medici*. The *Accademia* was responsible for conducting the student examinations.<sup>3</sup> With the occupation of the Islands by the French, formal University teaching was abolished by General Napoleon Bonaparte by decree published 18<sup>th</sup> June 1798. A few weeks after the French were forced to leave, Sir Alexander Ball re-instituted the University on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1800 and medical studies were resumed that same year with the first three doctors qualifying in 1804.<sup>11</sup>

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte ousted the Order of St. John from Malta. With the capitulation of the Order of Saint John, the sick French troops, initially housed in Mdina, were transferred on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1798 to the Valletta *Sacra Infirmeria* which was converted into a military hospital and renamed the *Grand Hôpital*. A full account of the *Sacra Infirmeria* during the French occupation is given by the Physician-in-chief of the hospital Dr. Claude Etienne Robert who published his experiences in 1802. Only a few wards were considered fit to accommodate patients, while the pharmacy, the laboratory and the storerooms were considered inadequate. Dr. Robert carried out a number of modifications to improve sanitation, ventilation and lighting, but he condemned the *Sacra Infermeria* as a hospital saying "*Ainsi, si l' hôpital de Malte etoit si vante du temps de l'ordre, ces louanges ne peuvent tomber que sur la maniere avec laquelle il etoit administre*". The wards were cleared from all incumbent objects including pictures on the walls, the bed canopies and curtains. The *Falanga*, previously reserved to treat venereal patients, was modified with the provision of large windows and connected to the Great Ward to increase the number of beds available for febrile patients.<sup>12</sup> Further arrangements became necessary to manage venereal

disease among the French troops and dedicated venereal disease hospitals were set up at the Santa Scolastica monastery and the Anglo-Bavarian Auberge in Valletta. These were closed down during the early British Administration.

The conversion of the *Sacra Infermeria* to a dedicated military hospital required the transfer of civilian patients to an alternative edifice. Accommodation for male civilians was arranged by January 1799 at the Convent of Mary Magdalene in Valletta, this being renamed *Hôpital Civil*, and was subsequently extended by adapting a de-consecrated church as a casualty ward, while the choir was converted into a dispensary. The upper floor of the monastery was used for fever cases, while the lower rooms were used for surgical cases and as stores. Part of the basement housed mental patients. A mortuary was built in the yard. The French Commissioner on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1798 re-organised the management structure of the hospital. The medical staff of the hospital consisted of two senior physicians assisted by three junior physicians, and two senior surgeons assisted by three junior surgeons and two barber-surgeons. The *Casetta delle Donne* continued to function as previously.<sup>3,13</sup>

The French occupation in 1798 thus saw a reorganization of the hospital services in Malta with a segregation of civil and military patients. After two years of civil strife, the Islands fell under the management of the British Colonial Office. The civil authorities continued to strive to provide adequate continuous hospital services retaining the establishments as set up by the French government. The original *Sacra Infermeria*, now variously named General Hospital or Garrison Hospital or Station Hospital, continued to function as a military hospital; while the *Infermeria delle Schiavi* in the Slave Prison, that saw its closure with the abolition of slavery imposed by Napoleon Bonaparte, was transformed in 1803 into a British Naval Hospital. This building continued to serve as a naval hospital until 1<sup>st</sup> July 1819, when the naval patients were again moved to the *Armeria* after a decision by the naval authorities to concentrate their various departments in Vittoriosa. At the beginning of the nineteenth century facilities for the treatment of sick merchant seamen - The Merchant Seaman Hospital - were set up in Malta, but the hospital closed down in 1822. Sick Merchant seamen were subsequently admitted to the Civil General Hospital in Valletta. In November 1850, a ward designated "The British

Merchant Seamen Ward" was set aside in the surgical division of the Civil Central Hospital at Floriana. The Valletta Garrison Hospital continued to be used until the opening of new Military Hospital at Mtarfa in 1920.<sup>14</sup> The building was subsequently passed on to the civil government and served, until 1940 as a Police Depot. During the Second World War, the building sustained significant damage. In the post-War period, the remaining halls served several minor functions, including that of an Examinations Hall. In 1978, the building was converted into the Mediterranean Conference Centre.

The *Hôpital Civil*, now Civil Hospital, and the *Casetta delle donne* continued to provide a service for the civil population right through the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These civil establishments were managed under the provisions of the "*Piano per il regolamento dell'ospedale di Malta decretato il 20 Marzo 1802*".<sup>15</sup> All forms of disease were treated in the civil hospitals. The increasing demands made on the establishments ensured that ward overcrowding became the norm by 1837. In May 1850, the inmates from the Civil Hospital and the *Casetta delle donne* were transferred to the newly-established Central Hospital at Floriana. The *Casetta delle donne* building became the Hospital for Incurables reserved exclusively for inmates of both sexes suffering from incurable disease. It retained this role until the inmates were transferred to a new hospice at Imgieret in 1892.<sup>16</sup> The *Casetta* building was destroyed during the Second World War. The site was utilized in the 1950's to erect the science laboratories of the University. The former Male Civil Hospital was in 1851 reorganized as an orphan asylum. The building was destroyed during the Second World War and only the church survives. The site was used to build a new government school. It subsequently served as a Service Club and as an elementary school for children.

The transfer of the civil hospital services to Floriana in 1850 saw the end of hospital service provision from the capital. However, community services continued to be furnished throughout the British administration. Following the 1814 administrative reforms, the *medici dei poveri* or "Physicians to the Poor" were incorporated with the Executive Police Department with the doctors being referred to as *medici di polizia* or "Police Physicians" with the Chief Police Physician being

the physician responsible for Valletta and Inspector of Dispensaries. In the early decades of the nineteenth century [14<sup>th</sup> April 1832], the administration instituted the first public dispensary *Farmacia dei poveri* at the *Auberge d'Italie* at Valletta with the aim of screening admission to the Civil Hospitals. This was staffed by two physicians and two surgeons who offered their services without payment, and a paid apothecary. It subsequently started being referred to as *albergo dei poveri* abridged as *berga*.<sup>17, 18</sup>

Today the only health-related services that remain in Valletta are limited to the Ministry of Health building at Castella Palace which houses also the offices of the Department of Health. In 2012, Valletta was declared European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for 2018 with a partner Dutch city, Leeuwarden. In order to commemorate and honour Valletta, the Malta Medical School journals will feature front covers with artworks that are in some way related to Valletta, commencing with this very issue.

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### Editorial note

For the December 2017 issues and for all of 2018, the *Malta Medical Journal* and the *Malta Medical School Gazette* will feature front covers that depict Valletta. This is in honour of Valletta 2018, wherein Valletta will be the European Capital of Culture, with all attendant programmes. The editorial board sincerely hopes that you will appreciate these covers as much as the actual contents.

Prof. Victor Grech

#### Cover Picture:

'Valletta'

*Oil on canvas with palette knife*

By Victor Grech

Victor Grech is a consultant paediatrician with a special interest in paediatric cardiology. He has a PhD in this field and another in science fiction. He is the editor of the journals *Images in Paediatric Cardiology* and the *Malta Medical Journals* and co-chairs HUMS, the Humanities, Medicine and Sciences Programme at the University of Malta.