

Organization of the »Marine Colony« for Children with Tuberculosis in Rijeka (Croatia): Entanglement between Medicine and Politics

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ABSTRACT

Tuberculosis was a major public health concern in the beginning of the 20th century. Since medications were not available at the time, therapy in general was based on health education, healing effects of climate, nutrition and rest. The Marine Colony was founded in 1924 in Rijeka, a city with turbulent political history, by the Antitubercular Consortium which was part of a planned program for the fight against tuberculosis on a national level in the whole of Italy. The Colony in Rijeka, Croatia specialised in care of children with clinical tuberculosis or under greater risk of developing disease. This article gives an overview of the medical treatment provided for children in Colony, as well as pointing out the political-agenda at that period.

Key words: tuberculosis, Marine Colony, children

Introduction

Tuberculosis had plagued mankind since time immemorial. The first cases date way back into prehistory, and it was also recorded with Egyptian mummies in the era of the pharaohs¹. On the threshold of the 20th century, an epidemic swept throughout Europe. Between the two world wars, the situation was compounded by the return of soldiers from the battlefield, migration of the population and refugees as well as a food shortage. During the first half of the 20th century, city of Rijeka witnessed an extremely turbulent period, becoming part of at least five different states². Consequently, one of the most significant public health problems was tuberculosis². Therefore the Marine Colony in Rijeka, Croatia was formed in 1924³. by the Ministry of Internal affairs of the Kingdom of Italy. The Marine Colony had a dual medical purpose. The Colony served as a summer resort for weak children coming from lower socio-economic circles, as well as an all year round hospital/colony primarily for children with tuberculosis, but also for children who were at an increased risk of developing tuberculosis. Children were accepted either for 45 days during the summer months⁴, or their stay was prolonged for all year long depending on their health status and later on funds available. Besides

its medical purpose, Colony was also an important tool of fascistic demographic politics.

Upon arrival children were submitted to medical examination, biochemical tests (blood, urine, sputum) and X-rays. Then according to their age, diagnosis and sex children were assigned to different departments. Children from age 2–6 were sent to the Nursery, children with most contagious forms were placed in the small East pavilion where temperature was most constant and position was sheltered from sea breeze, providing a maximum chance for recovery. General clinical examinations were run twice a month, once a month or bimonthly, as needed. As the Colony functioned both as a recovery centre and as educational institution at the same time, staff consisted of medical personnel and people in charge of everyday work, such as teachers, supervisors, cooks, etc. Medical personnel consisted of medical doctor and nurses. Since there was a lack of educated nurses, mostly lay nurses were employed. Besides the medical staff who organised and supervised the medical program, there were also teachers who were in charge of education and organised work activities. Because of poor oral health, a dental

office was formed inside of colony, while consultations by specialists such as ophthalmologists and otorinolaringologists were organised when needed. Biochemical tests were performed in laboratory which was also integral part of the colony.

As there was no medications available to treat tuberculosis at the time, therapy relied mostly on healing effects of climate. At the same time diverse methods were used to increase strength and immune systems of the weak organisms. Diet was provided in a way to compensate for all deficiencies and to speed up the recovery process while at the same time satisfying all the needs of a growing organism. Additional meals of raw beef were served to anaemic children. Warm and cold showers, cold baths even during winter months, massages, together with light clothing were part of the healing procedure applied to children. Moreover, children were not allowed to wear any clothes but the one provided by the Colony which was very light for the season. During the summer they were barefooted, during winter they were not allowed to cover their backs or head. One of the key methods utilised was sleeping next to the open windows, including winter and storms, covered only by a light blanket (children with fever included). Children spent plenty of time outdoors, doing gymnastics and working⁵. Heliotherapy was gradually introduced, depending on the children's condition. During the 45 days stay parental visits were not allowed as it was believed they would decrease immune system and thus diminish chances for recovery.

As tuberculosis, as well as other diseases, was easily spread by lax personal hygiene standards or behaviour, the focus was put on raising hygienic standards and training children to maintain personal hygiene as well as the one of society. For educational purposes children were expected to clean their rooms, furniture and clothing.

During the first 8 years 693 children were admitted to hospital/colony. According to documents, of the 459 re-

leased children 359 were in excellent physical condition, 65 had significantly improved status, and for 35 data were not available since they were withdrawn from the treatment by the families⁶.

Besides serving as a sanatorium for children with tuberculosis or exposed to the bacteria, as well as the undernourished ones who were at risk of developing the disease, the colony on a larger scale was a part of fascist program of raising strong and loyal citizens. Children were starting days in the colony by salutation to the flag »which protects and give life«⁷. Children were raised in a Spartan way, but the goal was not only to heal their bodies, but also to change their tempers and weakness of character transforming the »rebellious ones into the obedient ones and shy and weak tempered ones into loyal ones« by the means of work, patriotism to Italy and religiosity⁷.

Conclusion

It appears that the formation of the colony was tightly related to the political ideology of fascism. Thus, by showing inhabitants that it was a benefactor and caretaker of the poor and unprotected, the Italian government was able to decrease political tensions. Nevertheless, the Colony was extremely successful in healing children from tuberculosis and improving their overall physical condition. Children were given shelter, provided with good nutrition and at least basic education. As the political situation started stabilizing, the interest in Colony started decreasing resulting in shortage of funds⁸. But the question worthy of further investigation remains unanswered – Did the methods applied cause a negative impact on the children's psychological development or opposite.

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**OSNIVANJE KOLONIJA ZA BORBU PROTIV TUBERKULOZE U GRADU RIJECI:
ISPREPLETENOST MEDICINE I POLITIKE**

S A Ž E T A K

Tuberkuloza je jedan od vodećih javnozdravstvenih problema s početka i prve polovice 20. stoljeća. Zbog nepostoja-nja adekvatnih lijekova terapija je općenito bila bazirana na zdravstvenom prosvjećivanju, pozitivnim utjecajima klime, prehrani i odmoru. 1924. godine u Rijeci, gradu turbulentne političke povijesti je osnovana »Morska kolonija« za djecu oboljelu od tuberkuloze i/ili djecu s povećanim rizikom razvoja tuberkuloze. Kolonija je bila dio programa Antituber-kuloznog konzorcija u sklopu nacionalne borbe protiv tuberkuloze Kraljevine Italije. U ovome radu podastire se pregled medicinskog tretmana djece u koloniji ali i ističe njegov izraženi političko propagandni kontekst.