

ON NOTABLE BOOKS IN OUR HISTORY



The book written by Dr. Vladimir Bazala from 1936, entitled *Self-Appointed Physicians – A Glimpse into the History of Medical Quackery*, has only 123 pages, yet comprising a wealth of data, examples and interesting items on the everlasting topic of medical quackery.

The book was issued by the School of Public Health, now Andrija Štampar School of Public Health.

At the time, another two publications had already appeared and inspired Dr. Bazala to write about the topic, i.e. *The History of Medicine in Croatia and Slavonia 1770–1850* by Dr. Lujo Thaller, a physician from our Hospital, who published these historical notes in *Liječnički vjesnik* in 1926–1927, and *Quack Doctors* written by Milan Jovanović Batut in 1923. Both of these publications are cited by Bazala in his foreword, with special reference to Thaller's activities and considerations that inspired him to write his book intended not only for physicians but also for the public at large. As Bazala says, he wanted "to collect all the scattered data on medical quackery at one place". And he managed to do it, as this small book offers an incredible amount of various and intriguing topics, persons and other data. Like Thaller, Bazala had a smooth and easy writing style, while citations from various periods of a hundred and more years back and descriptions of many peculiar figures make this book a very interesting reading. The book presents the then

attitudes of the official medicine towards quackery, illustrated by definitions, examples and legal provisions, folk medicine, priests as folk physicians, herbalists, miracle-workers, exorcists, crooks and tricksters, medical quackery in America, female medical quacks, magnetism and suggestions, etc. Bazala managed to present all these and even more. It should be noted that he shows sympathy for patients, in particular for the poor. He understands the man short of money, those that cannot pay the physician, and those suffering incurable disease and being abandoned by official medicine. They are driven by pure hope, trying to resituate good health.

Historically, this 'anomaly', as Bazala names it, was primarily caused by ignorance, however, psychological issues also played a major role. Poor economic status and the small number of physicians additionally emphasized the reasons for the spread of medical quackery. Bazala insists that all those charging their services should be punished severely. Interestingly, he does not believe that this anomaly could have been prevented by wide popularization of medicine. According to him, success can only be achieved by appropriate knowledge of the living conditions; it is important to inform the public about all conditions that are favorable for human health while reducing superstition. Bazala is aware of the slow developments in medicine, especially for those currently affected by incurable diseases. Therefore, he concludes that medical quackery will always exist and that "there is no remedy for this plague". As medical quackery is an eternal trouble, this book – although forgotten with time – has not lost its historical and permanent value; we can only hope that physicians will rediscover it, which will certainly help them understand their patients better and remember the definition of medical quackery: "Medical quackery is a parasite that lives on the science inadequacy and ignorance of the people".

Tanja Sušec