

Biennial conference of the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health: “Crisis in Health and Medicine”

University of Oslo, August 30 – September 2, 2023

Between August 30 and September 2, 2023, the Section for Medical Humanities: Anthropology and History at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Oslo (HELSAM) organised the 10th Biennial Conference of the European Association for the History of the Medicine and Health, entitled “Crisis in Health and Medicine”.

The common thread of the conference, crisis, referred to the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, war, economic and political crises, refugees and displacement, environmental crises, personal crises as a result of diagnoses of life-threatening conditions, and crisis in relations. Pandemic crises, war crises, or health systems crises have different impacts on minorities, racially, economically, or otherwise marginalised people. Declaring a crisis is an instrument of power and control. Crises, whether in systems, societies, or the individual suffering of patients, are simultaneously moments of crucial change that are important for considering suffering and treatment.

Invited speakers included Britt Kramvig from the Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Jeremy Green from Johns Hopkins University, Julia Irwin from the University of South Florida, and Guillaume Lachenal from Médialab, Sciences Po from France. Their talks ranged from a presentation of the archive of an Arctic healer, a member of the nomadic Sámi people of northern Norway (Britt Kramvig), to medical waste pollution and the ideologies of material reuse and disposable use (Jeremy Green), the history of disasters and the politics of global humanitarian aid (Julia Irwin), and the relationship between the history of medicine, environmental humanities, and biosciences (Guillaume Lachenal).

The other participants were historians, cultural historians, anthropologists, ethnologists, physicians conducting research in the field of history of medicine within the framework of institutes or faculties, as well as those who deal with this topic in their free time, and doctoral students of the above-mentioned disciplines. Slovenia also participated in the conference for the first time, represented by Mojca Ramšak, with a topic included in the section on physicians, patriotism and professional identity, which analysed the reasons for violence against medical personnel during the coronavirus epidemic.

The main part of the conference took place at the Blindern university campus, located on the western edge of Oslo. The official opening of the conference was held in the University Aula, adorned with paintings by Edvard Munch that narrate stories about the university and science – and about the sun; in the Domus Biblioteca building, which also houses the Faculty of Law; and the awarding of the prize for the best monograph on the history of medicine occurred at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology (Norsk Teknisk Museum).

Since 2002, the museum has also accommodated a Museum of the History of Medicine, featuring a permanent exhibition on the Norwegian history of medicine and the “Life and Death” exhibition. One of the most attractive parts of this exhibition is the mummy called Maren, who had been lying in damp soil without oxygen since the middle of the 19th century, causing her fatty tissue to turn into a waxy substance (adipocere, corpse wax). Her body was found in 1900 in the Oslo cemetery, where cholera patients were buried. Although Maren had tuberculosis, she most likely did not die from it. She was named Maren after a folk song that revolves around themes of love and death. Maren was initially kept in the collection of the pathology department of Oslo Hospital but was publicly exhibited on the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the University of Oslo (1986), which triggered public debates about the ethics of exhibiting human remains. In 2019, the mummy was examined using CT scanning. It was found that the skeleton and several internal organs were preserved but that she had a broken back and arm. No traces of cholera were found during examination.

At the conference ceremony at the museum, the award for best monograph in the field of history of medicine went to historian John Christopoulos for the book *Abortion in Early Modern Italy* (Harvard University Press, 2021). An honourable mention went to physician and historian of science Lisa Haushofer for the book *Wonder Foods: The Science and Commerce of Nutrition*

(University of California Press, 2022). The conference also awarded the prize for the best scientific article in the history of medicine to a doctoral student.

Throughout the conference day, books were available for purchase. The European Association for the History of Medicine and Health, in partnership with the publishing house Brill, publishes the series *Clio Medica: Studies in the History of Medicine and Health*, which has released more than 100 monographs. Additionally, in partnership with the Swiss Association for the History of Medicine and Science, it publishes the *European Journal for the History of Medicine and Health*, which in 2021 replaced its predecessor *Gesnerus: Swiss Journal for the History of Medicine and Science* (1943–2020). Medical history books published by Palgrave Macmillan Cham and Manchester University Press were also on display during the conference.

With ninety parallel sections, the conference pointed out that the role of medical historians is to contextualise crisis situations, provide quality information in accordance with professional standards, and highlight historical lessons about possible ways out of crisis situations that reduce the number of sick and dead and contribute to better community well-being.

Mojca Ramšak



Figure 1. Oslo, University's campus, Blindern.

