

Retrospective Diagnosis

The papers collected in this issue of Prague Medical Report were presented at the informal meeting which was held on 4th November 2008 in the historical building of Carolinum. The workshop entitled “Retrospective diagnosis” brought together researchers from Austria, Germany, and the Czech Republic. The scope of the meeting was to discuss recent methodological stimuli which have been adopted to medical history during the last ten or perhaps twenty years, and to compare situation in various Central European countries. So called retrospective (or historical) diagnosis was chosen as a crucial aspect of those changes.

Our initial assumption was that the continuous development of methodology of the “mainstream” historiography during the 20th century offered a great amount of impulses which in the last two decennia resulted in rapid changes of rather conservative area of medical history. We believe that those new aspects are definitely worth discussing especially if there is an opportunity to breach limits of local Czech historiography.

There was also a second purpose: historians of medicine have traditionally either historical or a medical education. While this duplicity has been hailed as an opportunity to devote oneself to cross-disciplinary studies, we are afraid that presently a true interdisciplinarity is difficult (or perhaps impossible) to carry out. Nevertheless the meeting can also be understood as another attempt to establish cooperation between historians and physicians and/or to show limits of approach of a historian and that one of a physician.

Our initial intention to catch up with recent novelties in the area of medical history deserves further clarification: History of medicine is considered to be part of “humanities”. However it also spans across a wide range of subjects related very closely to sciences (apart from medicine it is biology or physics) and during the 20th century it has been one of more (if not the most) important branches of history of science [1]. Medical institutions used to support their own historical research and even now main research centres for the medical history can be often found at medical faculties. This affinity to medical environment naturally affects methods and foci of the research. It has helped the medical history to gain resources and to flourish since the end of the 19th century, but on the other hand the research has pursued limited array of topics like “great discoveries” or “prominent medical personalities of the past” [2]. A hundred years ago this tie between medical institutions and medically oriented history was very useful. Biographical research

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or history of medical institutions constituted a legitimate approach and many essential contributions on this field were done.

Meanwhile the mainstream historiography has been evolving through the 20th century and although it flirted with mathematical methodology for a while it mainly tried to find the inspiration in humanities like philosophy (hermeneutics, phenomenology), sociology, ethnography etc [3]. This change is even more apparent in the Czech area, which until the “velvet revolution” has been effectively isolated from a western influence and therefore during the last 20 years the new instigations have been adopted rather rapidly.

Although medical institutions continue to provide institutional and financial support for the study of history and they still expect traditional subjects of famous physicians, discoveries or institutions to be treated, the history of medicine is forced to focus on modern topics using new historical methods. It includes study of marginal social groups (beggars, Jews, etc.), shifting emphasis from academically educated physicians to *empirics* and other healers, and research that takes in consideration “patient’s view” [4].

Nevertheless modern historiography has not been the only source of methodological changes. Since the mid 20th century the medicine has been forced to change the perception of itself, it lost part of its former professional prestige and it has been facing new opponents. In other words: the position of medicine as a science and a health service was evolving in a broader social context.

We believe that it is time for medical history to reflect not only “the medical past” but also “the past of history of medicine”; it must pay attention to its own motivations and development. In the humanities there is not a scientific objectivity but rather ever changing subjective re-interpretation. That is perhaps the most important legacy of the philosophy of the last century.

The idea of an international workshop in Prague came into being during the meeting *Geschichte(n) von Gesundheit und Krankheit* which was organised by our colleagues from Graz in April 2007. We started with a preliminary meeting of Czech historians which took place in Prague on October 25 2007 and was called *Diagnóza jako historický pramen*, and then as a continuation we organized an international workshop a year later [5]. On both occasions participated students of the PhD. programme “History of medicine”, that is part of curriculum of the 1st Faculty of Medicine.

Presented papers are organized chronologically, although this division does not reflect the methodological differences. The first part is dedicated to two palaeopathological studies (and its authors are physicians and anthropologists), then we included sections dedicated to early modern era, and the 19th and the 20th century.

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References

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2. The first institute for history of medicine Karl-Sudhoff-Institut für Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften was founded 1906 in Leipzig.
3. See a concise explanation in IGGERS G. G.: *Historiography in the twentieth century: From scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge*. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2005. (Also in Czech “Dějepisectví ve 20. století: od vědecké objektivitě k postmoderní výzvě” and German “Geschichtswissenschaft im 20. Jahrhundert: ein kritischer Überblick im internationalen Zusammenhang”.)
4. PORTER R.: The patient’s view. Doing medical history from below. *Theory and Society* 14: 175–198, 1985. LINDEMANN M.: *Medicine and society in early modern Europe*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1999, 1–2.
5. The proceedings from the Czech meeting were published in *Dějiny věd a techniky* 41(3): 145–232, 2008.