

A century of “The Society of Medicine and Natural Sciences of Parma” and three centuries of medical and scientific Academies and Journals in Parma

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The renewal of the *L'Ateneo Parmense - Acta Bio-Medica*, official Journal of “The Society of Medicine and Natural Sciences of Parma”, is an occasion for a brief history of the Society itself and of the medical and scientific organizations in this city, once capital of a small but prestigious autonomous state. Parma is, also, the seat of one of the oldest universities of the western world: the first documentation on an active Episcopal school for notaries public was the Imperial acknowledgement and concession (*Bulla*) of Otto I in 962 (*potestatem eligendi sive ordinandi sibi notarios*), and the great theologian Pier Damiani (Saint of the Catholic Church) (1007-1072) was studying and thereafter teaching in the local *Studium* in the first half of the eleventh century (from 1025) (first documents of the existence of a *Studium* (university) in Bologna date back to the year 1088). During the Middle Ages two Parmesans were among the most important surgeons of the time, Ruggero Frugardi and Rolando de' Capelluti, both authors of important textbooks of Surgery, then utilized in all the universities of Europe. Ruggero was also teaching in Salerno (and later in Montpellier) and is often considered of the Salernitan School (called also Rogerius Salernitanus), but many authors have spoken of a Parmesan Surgery School. In the second half of the fourteenth century, the city fell under the rule of the Visconti, dukes of Milan, who initially tried to close the University and after a few years limited its activity to promote that of Pavia, closer to the capital, Milan. Parma's *Studium* and its medical school survived for two centuries until the sixteenth century, when the University was re-

newed by the new Dukes Farnese. The seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were particularly favorable for the development of academic institutions and of all the cultural life, and the city was positively influenced by the progress of its university and by the interest in culture of the Farnese and Bourbon Dukes. Although Italy, and all western Europe, was divided into different autonomous countries (states), the university professors were used, since the middle ages, to moving from one university to another, aiming for the most prestigious. The use of Latin as the official language of culture encouraged such transfers and several times eminent academic teachers moved from Parma to more important universities in Italy and northern Europe, especially to Bologna, Padua and Paris.

The progressive cultural ferment in Europe and Italy after the Renaissance determined the birth, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, of the first cultural, scientific and medical societies (*Accademiae*) and journals. We do not have any documents that can testify to the existence of a scientific Society in Parma, but in 1686 one of the best Italian cultural journals: “*Il Giornale de' Letterati*” (*The Journal of Men of Letters*) was founded by the encyclopedic Benedictine monk Benedetto Bacchini. In the past, the word *Letterato* meant *man of culture and science* (not only of humanistic culture) and in the Journal numerous scientific and medical articles were present. Benedetto Bacchini did not mention the other experts who helped him in the compilation of the journal, but it seems that a group of *Letterati* used to meet in his cloister to discuss and write the journal, which was regularly published in

Parma for five years. After that, Bacchini was summoned to Modena by the Duke of that city as chief of his prestigious library (*Biblioteca Estense*). He moved to the new position with his Journal, where he started to publish also the names of the Editorial Board: among them the physician Bernardino Ramazzini. He is considered to be the father of modern *occupational medicine* and had studied Medicine in Parma prior to his return to his home town, the city of Modena, where he contributed to re-opening the local university and the medical school (1, 2).

In the seventeenth century in Parma a “College for Noblemen” (*Collegio dei Nobili*) was also instituted and soon became very famous; it was attended by many young noble students from all over Europe, especially, but not only, from catholic countries and among them many future crowned heads. In this College, which in its most fertile period was attended by almost 600 students, an *Academy* of scholars and best students called “*Accademia degli Scelti*” was founded in 1672 with three sections, literary, military and scientific, also with interests in medicine.

The following century, the eighteenth, was very important for Parma from a cultural point of view; the last member of the Farnese family, Elisabetta, married the king of Spain, Philip V Bourbon and in 1732 the Duchy of Parma came under the government of the Bourbon family. The new Dukes, Carlo I (1732-1734), Elizabeth’s eldest son, later to become King of Naples and of Spain, his brother Philip (1748-1765) and his son, Ferdinando (1765-1802), brought a new French style of life to Parma, particularly in the cultural field. The Prime minister was the Frenchman Guillaume Du Tillot, an honest and competent politician and administrator, who summoned from all over Italy and from his own country men of culture (such as the famous philosopher Condillac as teacher of the young Duke Ferdinando), competent physicians and other professionals and skilled craftsmen (3). To improve the medical level of the local hospital and of the various physicians of the ducal court a “*Physio-anatomic Academy*” (*Accademia fisio-anatomica*) was instituted, transforming an anatomy theater or laboratory to something more general where the human body was studied from the point of view of its functions and diseases. This was legalized in 1751 by a law (*leges*

Academiae Hospitalis) which helped to reform both the Hospital and the Medical faculty (3). Chief of the Academy was the Chief physician (*Protomedico generale*) of the Duke and Dean of the faculty. According to its rules, the Academy members had to meet every week, alternating physiology and anatomy with clinical discussions. Attendance at the Academy was mandatory for all the professors of the medical faculty and for the physicians of the hospital and of the Ducal court (3-5). Many meetings were open to all educated people and they were probably well attended because the population of the Duchy was very interested in all aspects of culture and, at that time, it was the single foreign country with the highest number of subscriptions to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D’Alambert.

Unfortunately, we do not have minutes or reports of these meetings, but we know that the mean level of general and academic medicine improved and many professors of the local or other universities continued to report in their *curricula vitae* their membership of the Parma Academy. In the same years, exactly in 1757, the glorious *Accademia di Belle Arti* (further sponsor of the *Accademia di Brera* in Milan) was also founded and some professors of Anatomy were members and teachers of both institutions.

Furthermore, a few years later, in 1765 one of the first Italian journals completely devoted to Medicine, the *Gazzetta Medica* (*The Medical Gazette*) was founded. Initially it was mostly a translation from a Belgian medical Journal with a few original reports, but these progressively increased in the following issues. The Journal, also published in Venice with minimal differences, was well prepared and was attracting memories and letters from all parts of Italy. The Prime minister was proud of its success and a few articles were cited and translated in the French journals. Nevertheless the Gazette ended its publication in Parma after only three years without any explanation (1, 2).

Du Tillot lost his appointment in 1771 but, before his leaving, he reformed the whole University, removing it from the supervision of the Jesuit order, and renewed the medical faculty calling as Dean Michele Girardi, Professor in Padua and former best student of the great G.B. Morgagni, and many other physicians from France, among them François-Guillaume

Levacher, as chief obstetrician and surgeon. After the dismissal of Du Tillot the *Accademia* probably limited its activity to the teaching of Anatomy, but it had given a strong impulse to the medical world of Parma, also including the habit of sending the best students and young physicians to attend abroad important universities of Italy, France, Germany and England. These physicians, such as the clinicians Rasori, Rubini and Tommasini, the surgeons Ambri and Mistrali, and the obstetrician Rossi were among the most famous in Italy between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Exactly at the beginning of the new century, in 1804, while all Northern Italy was under Napoleonic rule, these new scientists with some old masters from the Du Tillot age and of the previous *Accademia fisio-anatomica* founded a new scientific association called *Società medico-chirurgica di Parma (Society of Medicine and Surgery)* (6). With respect to the previous academy, which was never considered as a precursor, the new society was instituted by the initiative of the physicians and not by the rulers, nobody was obliged to attend the meetings, and they were not devoted to one single area (anatomy).

Ettore Ponzi in a brief history of the “Società di Medicina e Scienze Naturali di Parma” (6) affirmed that the new Medical Society had been constituted, under the auspices of Mederique Moreau de Saint-Mery, chief of the new French government of the old Duchy, by the most important physicians in the city, the university Professors Pietro Rubini, Giacomo Tommasini, Giuseppe Ambri and the elderly French Obstetrician F-G. Levacher. In 1806 the Society started the publication of a Journal (*Il Giornale della Società Medico-Chirurgica di Parma*) which continued publishing original articles (*Articoli della Società*) summaries and reviews from other medical journals and books (*Letteratura Medica*) until 1815. Among various clinical and pharmacological articles, there were discussions on topics of major interest in that moment, like vaccinations and the medical theory of “*controstimolo*”, the Italian elaboration of the doctrine of the Scotch physician John Brown, that had in the Parmesan Giovanni Rasori and Giacomo Tommasini the main exponents. The journal was written in Italian, although the old Duchy was at that time a department

of the French Empire, like Piedmont and Liguria, and French was the official language, mandatory for all public acts.

In 1814 the former Duchy of Parma, Piacenza and Guastalla was assigned to Marie Louise (the beloved *Maria Luigia* for the Parmesans), wife of the defeated ruler, Napoleon, and daughter of the Emperor of Austria Franz I of Habsburg-Lorraine: the old institutions were reformed and the University renewed. Shortly after, in 1815, the journal stopped publication, but in the following years news of the activity of the Society continued to appear in the local newspaper “*La Gazzetta di Parma*”.

After Pietro Rubini’s death, in 1819, we do not find any more news about the Society, but most of the former members were still active in another cultural institution founded among others by G Tommasini, in 1815: “*Il Gabinetto Letterario*” (*The Literary Room*) with the goals of inducing “*meetings of people interested in literature and sciences*” and of propagating “*useful knowledge*”. Among the various Presidents the association had since its beginning, there were the physicians Pietro Rubini and Joseph Frank. The *Gabinetto* was closed in 1831 by the Ducal government because of the independence insurrections of that year; it was reconstituted in 1840 by Professor Giorgio Jahn, Director of the Botanic Garden, but disappeared a few years later. The following years were rich in political meaning for the independence and unification of Italy and in Parma, as in the rest of Italy, many physicians were among the most fervent patriots preferring civil to scientific involvement. Moreover, local government blocked any kind of association, even literary or scientific, trying to oppose the spread of patriotic feelings. Cultural enterprises restarted after the unification of Italy in 1860, and a “*Circle of scientific reading*” (*Circolo di Letture scientifiche*) was instituted; it soon set up an up-to-date library with many scientific books and journals and was attended by most of the professors of the medical and scientific faculties, and by many physicians of the city. The “*Circle*” in 1869 merged with the richer *Casino di Lettura* (*The Reading House*) forming the *Society of the Casino di Lettura* and continuing to subscribe scientific and medical journals, to improve the library and to organize scientific meetings and discussions among its members.

In 1887, the Professors of the Medical faculty founded a new medical journal called "*L'Ateneo Medico Parmense*" published for 5 years until 1891. The Journal wanted to have a nationalistic character, trying to stress the role of Italian medical observations and research in a period in which the best Italian scientists were yet publishing their studies in foreign journals. In the first issues references to previous Parmesan medical journals and Societies and to local medical glories like Rasori and Tommasini were clear. The Journal stopped its publication probably because of the transfer of the first director, Giuseppe Sivestrini to another university but it was time to restart a new Medical Society, which was re-founded in 1899 by the medical faculty and by the local section of the *Ordine dei Sanitari* (the college of all physicians of Italy) which had been publishing a *Bollettino* (Bulletin) since 1898. The society was called "*Associazione Medico-Chirurgica di Parma*" and the first President was the internist Alberto Riva, and the honorary President was the elderly surgeon and pathologist Professor Giovanni Inzani (1827-1902), hero of the independence of Italy and several times volunteer as soldier and physician in the wars of Independence and also in peace such as in occasion of a severe epidemic of cholera.

Since its foundation, the Society had frequent meetings attended by numerous members and of other physicians of the university and of the hospital. The communications had been published since the beginning in a bulletin, initially called "*Rendiconti dell'Associazione Medico-Chirurgica di Parma*". The Association had more than 100 members, who increased with the years, as also its scientific importance was growing. In 1908 it changed its name to *Società Medica* to open the membership also to experts in allied sciences such as biologists, chemists, pharmacists and veterinarians. In the same year, the Society changed the title of its bulletin to "*Bollettino della Società Medica di Parma*" which rapidly became one of the most important national medical journals. The new society, founded only a few years before, but with prestigious precedents in the XVIIIth and XIXth century, if not also in the XVIIth, had become in the first decades of life the most important scientific association in the city and was attended by different professionals in the field of life sciences. In 1928 its name was again changed, as was that

of the *Bollettino*. The new Bulletin was called *L'Ateneo Parmense* and the physiologist Mario Camis was appointed as director by the assembly of members. Camis was the beginner of a prestigious and still active Parmesan school of neurophysiology, which has counted among its exponents world famous names as Giuseppe Moruzzi, Pietro Arduini, and Giacomo Rizzolatti, all active members of the Society. Since then, the Society and the Journal have had an active life, even though in the last years of internalization and superspecialization of medicine the importance of general scientific societies, especially if of local interest, has decreased progressively. *L'Ateneo Parmense* continued to receive many papers for publication from local and other researchers from all over Italy and abroad, and in 1965 started publishing two different editions, one of exclusively medical interest and the other oriented to basic sciences, called respectively: "*Acta Bio-Medica*" and "*Acta Naturalia*" of "*L'Ateneo Parmense*".

The medical edition of the journal has been indexed since the seventies in *Excerpta Medica*, *Index Medicus* and further also in other references lists like *Medline* and *Embase*, both on paper and on web.

Probably in the third millenium a local scientific academy, as our Society is, cannot aspire to an international or leading role, but can certainly be an important way of meeting fellow scientists and a stimulus to scientific incentive, especially for young researchers.

Furthermore, the continuous subspecialization of medicine could remove from the young scientists the possibility of a global maturation and an up-to-date preparation in general aspects of science, with the danger of not using general knowledge acquired in other fields for their own research. Exactly these goals pushed the scientists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to found the first academies and scientific journals.

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