



From Hippocrates to Clio: Writings on Medicine from the Humanities

Miguel de Asúa

Hygea Ediciones (Historical Series), 2023. 280 pages.

ISBN 9789874889775

NEW CONTRIBUTIONS ON MEDICAL HUMANITIES

It is a pleasure to comment on this book by Miguel de Asúa *From Hippocrates to Clio*. While I was more closely involved in his activities during his Hippocratic phase, I also tracked his path as he ventured further into Clio's domain.

I was a reader of many of the valuable works Miguel published, as he alternated his scholarly studies with prestigious European university presses and no less rigorous popular science books: *The Tree of Sciences*, *Minerva's Games*, *Science and Literature*, books that highlight research in our country like *A Silent Glory* and *The Science of May*; or *Facing Darwin*, where he brings the theory of evolution closer to the public in the context of Christianity.

Even as he was engaged in this extensive and significant work on the history of science, he continued to publish papers on medicine, particularly in pediatrics. His diverse background—which spanned basic research, university teaching, pediatrics, virology, philosophy, theology, and eventually the history of science—made him a sought-after contributor by various medical societies for their conferences, seminars, and publications. That gave rise to the works compiled in *From Hippocrates to Clio*, a selection of which I will briefly address, focusing on my specialty, pediatrics.

In *Reflections on Medicine, Philosophy, and Pediatrics* (2004), the author highlights that until the 19th century, 'when medicine became more effective,' it remained heavily influenced by philosophical thinking.

In this context, it is essential to emphasize the importance of Alcmaeon of Croton, Empedocles, and, most notably, Galen, whose doctrines endured for 15 centuries and who titled one of his works *The Best Doctor is Also a Philosopher*. In the Middle Ages, there was a controversy between philosophers and doctors (the philosophers followed Aristotle, and the doctors followed Galen). A distinction existed in the Islamic world between the *Tabib*, a philosopher-physician, and the *Mutatabbib*, a practical doctor. In the Renaissance, medical humanism emerged; the early modern era saw the continuation of the bond between medicine and philosophy, illustrated by the cases of Sydenham and Descartes, the latter of whom received an invitation to teach medicine at the University of Bologna. By the late 19th century, there was a gradual separation between philosophy and medicine, with medicine losing its explicit philosophical foundation and adopting a more 'positive' tone. The sharp critique by Ivan Illich regarding the dehumanization of medicine helped consolidate a response that focused on the vital role of the humanities in ensuring a more humane and effective medical practice.

The second part of this work refers to pediatrics, which emerged within the intellectual climate that transitioned from the Enlightenment of the mid-18th century to the Romanticism of the early 19th century.

In the Enlightenment, a movement that emphasized the potential for societal betterment through science and education, the first pediatric treatises appeared, together with the pioneering institutional initiatives for children dealing with illnesses and disabilities.

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Received: 07/15/23 Accepted: 08/01/24 Online: 08/12/24

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.51987/revhospitalbaire.v43i3.3391>

How to cite: Wahren C. New Contributions on Medical Humanities. Rev. Hosp. Ital. B. Aires. 2024;44(3):e0000391

Rousseau's publication of the *Emile* helped raise awareness about childhood (although the author humorously reminds us that the five children Rousseau had with Thérèse Levasseur were placed in an orphanage, which suggests that intellectuals should not always be taken too seriously).

Miguel notes, 'Every intervention is significantly more delicate, and especially, we always encounter some degree of uncertainty regarding how situations will develop. In treating a child, we are, in a sense, helping to mold the future adult they will become. Pediatricians are essentially optimistic beings.' He concludes with a quote from the 1st-century poet Juvenal: 'A child deserves the greatest respect.' I would add a phrase from the pediatrician, educator, writer, and martyr Janusz Korczak: 'Adults must elevate themselves to the level of children.'

The 'Graduation Ceremony of the School of Medicine at HIBA' on April 18, 2007, serves as an example of a farewell 'to the professional childhood that is the medical degree, and a welcome to the turbulent adolescence that is typically the residency, where medical identity is forged.

It is stated that 'medical rationality cannot be the same as economic or bureaucratic rationality. Therefore, we must defend, by any means necessary, the dignity of the profession,' which the author describes, citing Edmund Pellegrino, as 'the most human of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities.' Miguel quotes a phrase from Plato's *Republic* inscribed at the entrance of the Yale Medical Library: 'They carry torches that they pass to one another.' The torch fire represents both the light of understanding and the warmth of the heart: there can be no healing without both aspects-knowledge and warm empathy.

In "*Noticias históricas sobre las revistas médicas*," a review is conducted of the first scientific journals from the mid-17th century, the earliest medical journals from the late 17th century, the explosion of scientific journals in the mid-18th century, and the enduring medical journals of the 19th century (Lancet, NEJM, JAMA). It also covers the first Argentine medical journal: the *Anales de la Academia de Medicina de Buenos Aires* (1823), which featured contributions from Manuel Moreno on periodic fever and quinine, as well as endemic goiter and iodine; the *Revista del Hospital de Niños*, established in 1897; and *Medicina*, founded in 1940. Much like there is nothing older than a newspaper from yesterday, Miguel suggests revisiting the past can impart crucial lessons for our current situation. The ancient medical literature makes us aware of an essential dimension of medical knowledge: its transience and fragility. It is up to mature clinical judgment and discretion to acknowledge this relative dimension of practice and the inherent fragility of all medical knowledge.

In "*La muerte del niño en la literatura*" ("The Death of a Child in Literature", 2011), we read: "The death of a child always carries absolute devastation. The pediatrician is confronted, explicitly or implicitly, by the family and the very reality itself. We face something that is an essential disorder of things, a dissonant screech that irreparably tears at the fabric of life, breaking any scheme of intelligibility we may ascribe to the world." The text then

considers literary episodes such as the death of Alyosha and Ivan's indignant speech in *The Brothers Karamazov*; the death of Judge Othon's son in *The Plague*, where Camus spares no details about the child's agony; the scene of baby Rocamadour's death in Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (Hopscotch), where everyone realizes the child is dead except for the mother; in Cortázar's short story "La señorita Cora," the death of the pubescent boy in love with the nurse and the scene of the empty room the following morning: the mattress with the stained plastic cover, the maid washing the floor-scenes following the death of a child, which those who witness them never forget. There is also the home death in "Tini," where Eduardo Wilde recounts the death of a child from croup (diphtheritic laryngitis) and says, "If there were words in any language to describe the moment when Tini's mother saw her operated son again, I would try to sketch the scene [...] but there are no such words." Wilde's everyday medical experience, his encounter with a child's death, records an abyss that every pediatrician has had to face at some point (or many).

In "La Peste Negra: consecuencias sociales y culturales" (The Black Death: Social and Cultural Consequences", 2020), Miguel proposes taking a closer look at the historical discussion about the consequences of the Black Death in order to reflect more thoroughly on the COVID-19 pandemic (always keeping in mind that "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there"). He highlights how various plague accounts share common traits, such as violent protests against restriction measures (Defoe refers to complaints about what they perceived as "violence against freedom") and both minor and major crimes committed by opportunists. In the Milan plague, when processions were suspended, people sang litanies from their windows. With the loss of between a third and half of Europe's population, there were increases in prices and wages, contributing to a decline in feudal dominance. The article references episodes of Jewish massacres between 1348 and 1352, which led to a significant migration of that community to Eastern Europe. The plague also brought about profound changes in the Catholic Church, as "the best of the clergy died, and the worst survived."

"*La Pediatría como especialidad cultural y social*" (Pediatrics as a cultural and social specialty", 2012) provides an overview of childhood and the constitution of pediatrics from ancient times to the present. We live intoxicated by an excess of information; that is why I want to conclude with something Miguel used in his lecture for the graduates of the School of Medicine at the Hospital Italiano de Buenos Aires (HIBA), a quote from T. S. Eliot's poetic play *The Rock*: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

What we have in the collection of articles gathered in *From Hippocrates to Clio* are pellets of wisdom.

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