SOME NOTES ON SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CONTINENTAL HOSPITALS

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Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), the eminent Stuart and Georgian physician, was an avid collector of historical manuscripts, particularly those relating to all branches of medicine and the allied sciences. His collection, an original nucleus of the British Museum, remains one of the most important archives for research into the medical history of early modern Europe. Even the voluminous documents devoted to unrelated subjects often contain some information of relevance for the history of medicine. It is the intention of this article to draw attention to, and describe some of, these obscure items concerning the nature of continental hospitals in the seventeenth century which are hidden in otherwise non-medical works.¹ The sources for this information are five manuscript diaries of European travels kept by Englishmen between 1610 and 1687. Four of the documents, for the years 1610, 1626, 1655–8, and 1687, are anonymous.² Another was kept by the physician Joseph Colston on his way to the University of Padua in 1641 to study medicine.³ An additional diary, written by the Catholic divine Richard Lassels (d. 1688) as his account of Lady Catherine Whetenall’s journey to Italy in 1650, contains a few references to Italian hospitals and has been included to complement the descriptions in the Sloane Manuscripts.⁴ The journals were composed during grand tours and principally concern France and Italy, with one description of Malta. In all, observations on nine hospitals in five European cities were recorded.

The descriptions are significant firstly for the information which they provide on these continental hospitals. This was a period of great importance for the development of modern medicine. Yet, far too little is known of this era, even concerning such basics as the physical features of the hospitals or the type of care to be found there. Secondly, the diaries illustrate the nature of the medical concerns and knowledge of the Englishmen who kept the accounts. In some instances they were not especially interested in medicine. All the journals place particular emphasis upon the grandiose public and private buildings which were visited and the hospitals were included in this category, even by Colston who had professional medical interests. Nevertheless, most of the diarists provide sufficient detail to reveal a genuine concern for hospital management. In at least one case, that of the anonymous traveller of 1655–8, the writer demonstrated a keen interest in the natural sciences and intellectual concerns in general, as well as in medical matters.⁵ Moreover, the observations made could provide the basis for a useful interchange of knowledge between the institutions on the Continent and those in England. This was certainly the case with
Colston who both before he left London to take his M.D. at Padua and after his return to practice in the City was closely associated with St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. Finally, the content of these manuscripts has some hitherto unperceived relevance to Sloane’s own professional and intellectual interests, although the extent to which Sloane utilized these descriptions, if at all, must remain in doubt.

One of the fullest descriptions of a European hospital was left by an anonymous traveller to Italy in 1610, who wrote a graphic account of Milan, which he stated contained twelve hospitals. Of these, two were the most impressive. One, the renowned Ospedale Maggiore founded by Francesco Sforza (1401-66) in 1456, had 80,000 crowns in revenue per annum. It was built in two stone quadrangles with eight halls or wards. In each hall there were three rows of beds, with fifty beds to a row. In total, therefore, he estimated that the hospital contained 1,200 beds. A chest was provided for each patient and every bed was surrounded by a curtain or valance. Every patient had either a woman or a boy to attend upon him, and at the upper end of the halls marble chapels were erected for the patients’ use. Seven of the halls held sick persons and the last was reserved for pregnant women. It is likely that this is the hospital described by Richard Lassels in his account of Lady Catherine Whetenall’s journey to Italy in 1650 as being of vast compass and exquisite building.

The second great city hospital was smaller, containing only 300 beds, but its income was 100,000 crowns a year and it befriended six other hospitals, providing for their maintenance. It was built in a brick square, with a pair of stone staircases in the middle. In addition, the anonymous visitor described the Hospital of St. Joy, founded by an unspecified queen of Spain. Its officers included a master, a divine, a surgeon, and an apothecary. Finally, the castle, also constructed under Francesco Sforza, held a hospital for soldiers who suffered from accidents or illnesses. It could provide beds for 100 of the 400 soldiers in the castle.

Rome’s most elaborate hospital was Santo Spirito, or the Hospital of the Holy Ghost, founded by Innocent III and rebuilt in 1474-82. It is not far from St. Peter’s, and in 1650 Richard Lassels commented that in his experience hospitals were often placed near the great churches so that immediately after people had paid their duties to God, they could pay their duties to their neighbours by charity in the hospitals. He described it as a fair hospital with a revenue of 70,000 crowns per annum. Generally uninterested in the ordinary functions of the institution, he restricted his comments to the fact that Pope Urban VIII (1623-44) had established in the hospital a separate place for gentlemen, isolated from the remainder of the sick. Here they had more space and better conditions. In 1687 an anonymous visitor described Santo Spirito as one of the finest hospitals in Europe with 1,000 beds. However, he set the annual income at only 17,000 crowns. He also briefly noticed the Fornella, where fools and madmen were kept, and the English college, formerly a hospital built by English merchants in Rome for the use of English pilgrims.

Another unidentified English traveller who between 1655 and 1658 visited France, Italy, and Turkey has left a description of the hospital in Malta.
of St. Elmo and was associated with the Knights of St. John who ruled the island. This well-built hospital was intended to provide for the sick of all nations, although members of the Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Muslim religions were confined to a separate ward.\textsuperscript{15} One section was reserved for the knights who fell sick. They were tended twice a day by other knights with food of their own choosing on silver plates.\textsuperscript{16} In another ward in the hospital medical treatment was given to soldiers and others of low status.

This same diarist has also briefly described the hospital of St. John's in Angers, founded in 1180 by Henry II, count of Anjou and king of England.\textsuperscript{17} It held 120 beds, and like the one in Malta was open to the sick or infirm of all countries.

Finally, two travellers visited the hospitals of Paris. Out of the dozens of hôpitaux and hospices in seventeenth-century Paris attention was naturally focused on the two large rival institutions, the Hôpital de la Charité and the Hôpital de l'Hôtel-Dieu.\textsuperscript{18} The latter was the largest and most ancient institution in the city, but la Charité, established in the Faubourg Saint-Germain in 1602 by the Brothers of St. John, had a reputation as a model hospital. It has been likened to a modern establishment, clean, well staffed, and, with 150 beds, relatively large.\textsuperscript{19} Visitors in the later seventeenth century invariably praised la Charité, including John Evelyn who remarked that 'The Charité gave me great satisfaction in seeing how decently and Christianly the sick people are attended, even to delicacy'.\textsuperscript{20} In view of this, it is informative that Joseph Colston who was in Paris in September 1641 on his way to Italy expressed great enthusiasm for the hospital. He was already well acquainted with St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, and his description of la Charité, as surpassing all in its nature and better than any he had seen,\textsuperscript{21} is therefore particularly interesting.\textsuperscript{22} He reported that Cardinal Richelieu was its protector and he paid special attention to the religious activities of the institution. A fine chapel was included in the hospital and each ward had an altar. A priest was responsible for the oversight and distribution of the patients' diets and diverse lay brethren similar to friars attended the sick.

Colston also praised the Hôtel-Dieu. However, the most complete and interesting account of this hospital, alternatively called the Grand Hospital of Paris, is provided in a diary for 1626.\textsuperscript{23} The anonymous English gentleman took some care to describe the institution in detail, and his account reveals much about the hospital shortly after the restoration and enlargement of 1602-9 and of 1619. His observations have been transcribed in full:

\begin{quote}
At the first entrance into it you came into their chappell. Small, but handsome & well furnished. After, you passe into a longe gallerie haveing fourer ranks of bedds: two close to the walls, and two in the middle. The bedds are all suitable the one to the other, their vallence, curtaines & rigges, being all yellow. At the further end of this, a dore opened into an other chamber, dedicated onely to sick woomen: & within them an other roome, wherein woomen with childe are lightened of their burden; and their children kept till seaven yeares of age, at the charge of the hospitall. At the middle of the first galleire, towards the left hand were other fower ranks of bedds: little differing from the rest, but that their furniture was blew; & in them there was noe place for any, but such as were someway wounded, & belonged properlie to the Chirurgeon. There are numbered in the whole hospitall noe
fewer than 700 bedds (besides those of attendants, preistes apothecaries etc): and in euery bed, two persons. One would imagine that in such a variety of wounds & diseases, a walke into it, & a view of it, might sauour more of curiosity, then discretion: but indeed it is nothing lesse for besides that noe person of an infectious disease is admitted into it, which maketh much for ye safety of such as view it: all thinges are kept there so cleanly, and orderlie: that it is sweeter walking there then in the best streets of Paris: none excepted.

The removal of individuals with contagious diseases was a recent innovation. In the early seventeenth century fear of the plague had led to the establishment of two large isolation hospitals in the suburbs, both under the direction of the Hôtel-Dieu. The traveller's account was perhaps not completely accurate. Although each bed was designed for two persons, overcrowding was common; by the next century there were descriptions of up to twelve sick in a bed. Moreover, if his total for the number of beds, 700, was correct, this meant that without overcrowding the hospital could hold only 1,400 patients. Yet, available figures for occupancy later in the century reach as high as 4,000 plus, and even the lowest calculations, in the early eighteenth century, are above 2,000. However, the anonymous diarist's description is far more complimentary to the hospital than some accounts, and may have been truthful for this early period shortly after its reconstruction.

These journals provide an indication of the nature of medical treatment in continental hospitals in the seventeenth century. At the same time, they were written by Englishmen, of whom at least one was a physician, and came to be held in England by Sir Hans Sloane, one of the greatest medical men of the period. Hence, they also have some significance for British medical history.


2 British Library, Sloane MSS. 682, 1442, 3228, 1385.


4 Add. MS. 4217. This manuscript was part of the collection of the Reverend Thomas Birch. For Lassels see L. Stephen and S. Lee (ed.), The Dictionary of National Biography (London, 1885–1901), vol. xxxii, pp. 161–2.

5 This included great attention paid to the curiosities of nature found in the University of Oxford and a most remarkable apothecary's cabinet in southern France: Sloane MS. 3228, passim.

6 For Colston's relations with St. Bartholomew's and its medical staff see the author's 'A Private Consultation by Dr. William Harvey in 1642', Medical History, xxiv (1980), pp. 93–4.


8 Sloane MS. 682, fols. 10r–14.

9 For a description of this hospital, erected by the Florentine architect Antonio Averulino, see Cecilia M. Ady, A History of Milan Under the Sforza (London, 1907), pp. 265–7. For general attitudes towards hospitals in seventeenth-century Italy see Carlo M. Cipolla, Public Health
and the Medical Profession in the Renaissance
(Cambridge, 1976).
10 Add. MS. 4217, fol. 18v.
11 Ibid., fols. 24-24v.
12 Sloane MS. 1385, fol. 11v.
13 Ibid., fols. 27v-28.
14 Sloane MS. 3228, fol. 64.
15 Roderick Cavaleiro, The Last of the Crusaders
16 Sloane MS. 3228, fol. 64.
17 Ibid., fol. 34v.
18 For both these and the remaining Parisian
hospitals see Leon Brièle (ed.), Collection de
documents pour servir à l'histoire des hôpitaux de
Paris, 4 vols. (Paris, 1881-7); Maurice Raynaud,
Les Médecins au temps de Mohîère (Paris, 1862).
The basic account of the Hôtel-Dieu remains
Rondonneau de la Motte's Essai historique sur
l'Hôtel-Dieu de Paris (Paris, 1787). See also
Marcel Fosseyeux, L'Hôtel-Dieu au XVIIe et au
XVIIIe siècles (Paris, 1912), and, for a brief
description of seventeenth-century medical con-
ditions, Anne Denieul-Cormier, Paris à l'aube
du grand siècle (Paris, 1971). Both institutions are
included in Leon Bernard, The Emerging City,
Paris in the Age of Louis XIV (Durham, North
Carolina, 1970), pp. 220-33. La Charité, also
called after its founders, l'Hôpital des Frères de
Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, should not be confused with
two smaller contemporary institutions, l'Hôpital
de la Charité-Notre-Dame and l'Hôpital de la
Charité-Chrétienne, see Jacques Hillairet,
Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris, 2 vols. (3rd
ed, Paris, 1663), vol. i, pp. 161, 210, 244.
19 L. Bernard, op. cit., p. 221, a seventeenth-
century view of la Charité is included among the
plates at the end of this work.
20 Quoted in L. Bernard, op. cit., p. 221.
21 Sloane MS. 118, fol. 57.
22 In view of Colston's presumed comparison
between St. Bartholomew's and la Charité it is
worth while to note Sir William Petty's later
remarks on these institutions. He compared the
mortality rates for la Charité with those for St.
Bartholomew's and St. Thomas in 1678-9 and
concluded that the London hospitals had the
advantage of better treatment by a slight margin,
see, Charles H. Hull (ed.), The Economic Writings
of Sir William Petty, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1899),
vol. ii, p. 511.
23 Sloane MS. 1442, fols. 42v-43.
25 Ibid., p. 224.
26 Petty estimated average occupancy in 1678-9 as
27 For example: L. Bernard, op. cit., pp. 223-33.