

Medical History Instruction in West Germany

by

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The Present Status of Medical History in Medical Education

Medical history is not an historical discipline in the ordinary sense of the word, but a science that is meant to have applications to the current practice of medicine. Like the psychological and social sciences, it belongs to the humanities in medicine and broadens the spectrum of methods for advancing practical medical knowledge. Finally, it is an interdisciplinary field with close ties to those fields in other faculties whose work is important to medicine, or which are themselves dependent on the results of research in medical history (anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history, ethnology, etc.).

This description of medical history as it is conceived by those presently working in the field in Germany is the interim result of a development that is by no means finished.

The Origin of the Field of Medical History in Germany

Until the middle of the 19th century the study of the past was a vital component of theoretical and practical medicine. The reworking of traditions was accepted implicitly as part and parcel of medical progress. Historical sources were examined with respect to their informative content, and new discoveries had to be measured against the standards of past experience. The study of history was medical rather than historical; medical history was not an independent field of either instruction or research.

With the rise of medicine as a natural science, the status of the past changed; it seemed to be a succession of errors that were better ignored. An interest in medical history became the province of historians and philologists. Medical history developed.....out of touch with medicine, to all intents and purposes.....primarily as a linguistic and historical science. In Germany there were only a few research centers, notably the two in Leipzig and Berlin, which did work of any consequence with historical documents until after the end of the Second World War.

It is only in the past two decades that any significant change has occurred in the organization and status of the field. Factors of this change have been a broadening of medicine's notions of man and the world(notions that had previously been shaped solely by the natural sciences) and adventitious changes in the circumstances in which research and medical training are carried on.

The Organization of Medical History in Germany at Present

23 professorships in medical history have been created in the Federal Republic since 1962, most of these being attached to more or less sizeable institutes. The remaining faculties each either has a lectureship in medical history or is served by a visiting lecturer from a neighboring university. With only one exception, the professorships and institutes are incorporated into medical faculties; institute members are on the teaching staffs of medical schools.

Institutes differ considerably in respect of how well they are equipped, according to the university and fiscal policies of the

various federal states. There are also differences in personnel, with the number of associates varying from 2 to 20. Whereas a professor is as a rule an M.D., his associates may include historians, philologists, and natural scientists. Membership in an institute usually means a full-time position. The chances of promotion are limited.

Under the new regulations concerning medical school training the institute of medical history is responsible for teaching a freshman course the topic of which can roughly be described as medical terminology. The other courses (lectures, seminars, excursions) offered by the institutes are all either recommended or optional and have been meeting with a growing interest among students. On their written examinations students are required to answer several questions about medical history.

The Function of the Historical Method in Medicine

The current business of medical history is no longer determined solely by the tasks and laws of pure historical inquiry. What the medical historian tries to do through his research is rather to elaborate models of what has been meant by 'health' and 'illness' in the past.

with a special view to basic elements of this models to good account in clarifying present-day problems. Not only is the need for a philosophy of science adequate to our time universally felt in medicine, but numerous medical disciplines have come to demand the support of historical research as a matter of practical necessity. Accordingly, institutes of medical history are co-operating very closely e.g. with faculties of social medicine, epidemiology, anthropology, and ethnomedicine, and especially with the fields of general pathology, psychopathology,

and medical ethics.

Instruction in historical method serves as a propaedeutic to training in all the medical professions and is intended, moreover, to stimulate a critical cast of mind. What are to be learnt are e. g. the bases of our notions of soma and psyche, of illness and health, the problems peculiar to childhood and old age, the general principles of diagnostics and therapeutics, and models of behavior in response to distress, anxiety, dying and death. Medical history is able to show how dependent all the above phenomena are on historical antecedents for their structure, and in respect of the way they are experienced and the actions they engender. In doing what it is able to do, it helps us to understand the present better and contributes, no less than other medical disciplines, to the improvement and humanization of medicine.