

**CURING AND DISPLAYING TUBERCULOSIS IN ROME:
THE OSPEDALE FORLANINI AND THE MUSEO MORELLI**

Alessandro Aruta¹, Maria Conforti², Giulia Frezza³, Carla Serarcangeli⁴

¹Curator, Museum of the History of Medicine, Department of Molecular
Medicine at Sapienza University of Rome

²Associate professor, Unità di Storia della Medicina e Bioetica, Sapienza
University of Rome

³Research fellow at the Department of medical-surgical sciences and
biotechnology, Sapienza University of Rome

⁴Lecturer of History of Medicine and Bioethics, Faculty of Pharmacy and
Medicine, Sapienza University of Rome

The Ospedale Forlanini, originally "Istituto Benito Mussolini", was founded in 1934 in Rome as an up-to-date institution for the treatment of pulmonary diseases –especially, if not uniquely, tuberculosis. A vast and multifaceted healing city, the Forlanini included a magnificent park, a theatre, a subterranean lake, and an array of scientific and didactic institutions, mainly devoted to radiology. In the first decades of the 20th century tuberculosis was arguably the most dreaded communicable disease in Italy, as elsewhere in the industrialized world. Despite Koch's discovery of the aetiology of the disease in microbiological terms, no effective therapy was available; antibiotics would only be in common use in Europe and Italy by the end of the 1940s- beginning of the 1950s. Tuberculosis death rates in Italy were especially high in 1918, the last year of the First World War (60.000 deaths, with an increase of 41% compared with the pre-war period); they rose again in 1924-5. Probably this is one of the reasons why Fascism decided to give the question of tuberculosis a central

stage. This was in fact in many ways a propaganda move: Fascism, as other political regimes in the 1930s, considered the antituberculosis campaign, in military fashion, as a *war* waged against an invisible, sinister enemy 'from within'. This was also meant as an important part of a wider campaign for social hygiene, involving an ambitious building program and the 'risanamento' (restoration and sanitation plans) of large urban areas. Already in 1919 a law had been enforced requiring the creation of a web of institutes for tuberculosis prophylaxis; Fascism was thus following the public health policies already devised in Liberal era. The Ospedale "Benito Mussolini", located in the capital of Italy, was built at the initiative of Eugenio Morelli (1881-1960), a good friend and *protégé* of the powerful, if at times dissenting, Fascist Giuseppe Bottai, who in 1933 had established the *Istituto Nazionale per la Previdenza Sociale*, a crucial institution for the development of public health policies in Italy, and as such one that survived Fascism, the war, and has lasted to the present.

The anatomical Museum in the Forlanini was opened in 1941. It displayed anatomical preparations of a very peculiar kind, more than two thousand *specimina* –human remains conserved and arranged so as to provide a complete illustration of normal and pathological aspects of the human body. The story of the Museum is a fascinating one, blending science and artisanal skills – with a hint of charlatanism. Morelli bought the collection to an Austrian anatomical preparatory, Grützner, also hiring him for further works to be displayed in the Museum. Allegedly, Grützner used to be an itinerant showman, displaying his preparations for money, but he had an excellent conservative technique for bodily parts. As long as the legend goes, in the end he died because of the prolonged contact with noxious substances he used in his preparations. He was apparently encouraged to freely dissect and conserve parts of cadavers of patients who died in the Ospedale.

What we know for certain is that the Museum contains striking preparations of very thin 'slices' of bodies, enabling a detailed view of internal structures, something analogous to modern CAT (computed axial tomography) images.

This was a didactic museum, meant for students and medical practitioners working at the Ospedale. In wide use for decades for didactic purposes, now in danger of a complete destruction because of the dismissal and transformation of the hospital, the Museum Morelli represents an important case study to test viable solutions for a number of diverse and often controversial issues in museum studies. In particular, it allows addressing a

crucial question, namely, the musealisation of collections originally meant as tools for specialists. The importance of the Forlanini in the Roman *Novecento* and its centrality in the urban landscape, both at a symbolic and at a concrete level, is hard to deny. Despite the difficulty of opening such a collection to the lay public, also because of ethical threats, the reappropriation of the Forlanini and of its Museum by the city is under way. This may seem an utopistic project, but it could in fact become an episode, if not a model case, in a badly needed democratization and diffusion of scientific and biomedical knowledge.

REFERENCES

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