

NINETEENTH-CENTURY DISCIPLINARY ENQUIRY AT VICTORIA HOSPITAL, GOZO

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Disciplinary enquiries are a necessary and regular important feature of employer-employee relationships especially in the public sector. The enquiry if conducted fairly and without prejudice, serves to clarify misunderstandings which arise between employer and employee, and by studying the circumstances which led to the episode can also be instrumental in identifying and correcting problems in that particular department for the betterment of the service. Unfortunately, disciplinary enquiries are often conducted with an attitude of punishing the employee and protecting the employer - an attitude which, because of the defensive stance taken by the employee and the "close-mindedness" of the disciplinary board, puts aside the importance of identifying and correcting the problem which led to that situation in the first place. The present report describes such an enquiry into the actions of a junior medical practitioner employed with the public sector in the late nineteenth century, wherein the final intention was in disciplining the officer without attempting to correct the circumstances which led to the incident.¹

The incident occurred in the Government Hospital in Gozo. The Colonial Estimates for 1876 suggest that the medical staff at the Gozo Hospital included only a visiting Physician-Surgeon-Superintendent and a Resident Assistant Physician-Surgeon. Allowance was made for the occasional employment of extra Medical Officers from outside the hospital,² though it appears that it was preferred to utilize the services of the District Medical Officer for the Rabat area in times of shortage.³ The post of Medical Superintendent in 1887, the year of the enquiry, was occupied by Dr. B.M. It was not a residential post and the Medical Superintendent could leave the Rabat area provided this did not interfere with his duties and was available to attend emergency cases when requested to do so by the Resident Medical Officer.⁴ Dr. B.M. is known to have attended a number of abnormal deliveries in the Lying-in (Maternity) Ward of the hospital during the period from March 1876 to April 1893. Of a total of 23 abnormal deliveries, he was responsible for seven cases

managed on his own and a further six cases when assisting the Resident Assistant Medical Officer.⁵ The post of Resident Assistant Physician-Surgeon required the doctor to live on the hospital premises.⁶ The post in 1887 was filled by Dr. N.T. who was appointed to the post on the 13th October 1886.⁷ The District Medical Services in Gozo employed a further three medical officers, of which Dr. G.D. was responsible for the Rabat area. There were in 1851 a total of eight physician-surgeons practising in Gozo suggesting a further three doctors in private practice. One of these doctors in 1887 was Dr. P.S. who during his medical career was a District Medical Officer in Gozo (March 1876 - July 1881), was appointed a Resident Medical Officer at Victoria Hospital (July 1881 - April 1886), after which he entered private practice.⁸

The case which provoked the disciplinary enquiry involved a 35 year old woman who in the late afternoon of the 28th July 1887 was admitted to the maternity ward to deliver her seventh child. It appears from the correspondence that in spite of very strong labour pains, delivery was not progressing satisfactorily because of an abnormal presentation, the infant presenting by the legs. The attending Resident Assistant Medical Officer decided to call for help since the necessary "*...operazione ostetrica, come principio fondamentale non die giacumai essere eseguita da un solo pratico, ma die essere accompagnato se non da 2, almeno da un altro ostetrico.*" The patient was delivered of dead female child in the early hours of the 30th July after a labour lasting thirty one and a half hours.⁹

The disciplinary enquiry was initiated not because of the unfavourable outcome of the case,

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but because the attending Resident Assistant Medical Officer asked the assistance of the private practitioner rather than that of the Medical Superintendent or the Rabat District Medical Officer.¹⁰ An unfavourable obstetric outcome for the infant was an accepted feature of obstetric practice in the late nineteenth century. The rate of still births in the hospital amounted to 44.0 per 1000 total births, while the rate of infants dying in the first few weeks of life amounted to 66.1 per 1000 live births. The national stillbirth figure for Gozo was 3.1 times less at 14.2 per 1000 total births in 1895. The higher hospital rate may be accounted for by the fact that the hospital catered for women from the lower socio-economic groups and probably also for women who failed to deliver at home.¹¹

The enquiry was initiated by the Medical Superintendent by a letter sent the following morning to the Assistant Secretary to Government. Dr. N.T. was accused in the letter of acting contrary to the regulations by requesting in a difficult case of delivery the assistance of a private practitioner rather than that of the Medical Superintendent or the Rabat area District Medical Officer.¹² The Medical Superintendent apparently discussed the problem with Dr. N.T. and is alleged to have stated that his objection was to Dr. P.S. having been called to assist the case.¹³ Dr. N.T. responded by writing an emotional and detailed report on the 1st August 1887 to the Assistant Secretary to explain his actions. He apparently had second thoughts about his letter and withdrew it. In response to a subsequent request by the Assistant Secretary for an explanation, Dr. N.T. sent a toned-down version of the original letter on the 7th August 1887.¹⁴

In his defence Dr. N.T. reports that the Medical Superintendent was absent that night from Victoria, being at his summer residence at Marsalforn. At midnight of the 29th-30th July, in view of the clinical condition of the patient, he had sent a carriage for the Medical Superintendent to come to hospital. However, he estimated that the Superintendent would arrive at least one and a half hours later, a delay he considered too long.¹⁵ Dr. P.S. lived only a short distance away from the hospital, and on hearing of his problem, spontaneously offered his services. In view of the urgency of the case, Dr. N.T. accepted his help.¹⁶ Dr. N.T. further commented that he had no official instructions to ask the District Medical Officer for help in the absence of the Superintendent, besides which, the DMO at midnight could have been outside the

city attending to his duties.¹⁷ Dr. N.T. was subsequently reprimanded by the Assistant Secretary to Government in a note stating *"Having carefully considered Dr. T...s explanations, I have come to the conclusion that he has assumed a great responsibility in not calling early for the assistance of the PMO. Whatever may have been the circumstances of the case, it was not in my opinion an ordinary one, therefore he, Dr. T..., was bound to act as directed by the Regulations. I regret very much that I must disapprove Dr. T...s action in this case."*

Throughout the series of letters regarding the episode, one cannot but sympathize with Dr. N.T. who in the interest of his suffering patient put aside the standing regulations and asked for help from a private medical practitioner at hand, rather than waiting for his senior. The episode must have left Dr. N.T. disillusioned. On the 17th August 1887, he applied for transfer to the Cholera Hospitals in response to a notice sent to doctors by the Lt. Governor the previous day. His request was turned down on the 22nd August, though no reason for this refusal is recorded.¹⁹ Dr. N.T. remained in his post of Assistant Medical Officer until November 1892. He was eventually appointed Medical Superintendent for Victoria Hospital in May 1903.²⁰ The reasons why the Medical Superintendent reported the case can only be left to conjecture. Was it strict regard to procedure or were there other interests? Dr. B.M. had on other occasions reported the contractors supplying the hospital with meat and bread for not supplying these items according to their contracts, suggesting a strict adherence to procedure.²¹ However, Dr. B.M. regularly applied for permission to leave the hospital early during the summer months to go to his summer residence at Marsalforn.²² Was he afraid this concession would be withheld in view of this attendance of a private practitioner in his absence? Was there a personal antagonism to Dr. P.S. as hinted at by Dr. N.T.'s first letter?²³ Dr. P.S. had been the previous Resident Assistant Medical Officer in the hospital from July 1881 to April 1886 and his withdrawal to private practice had left the Medical Superintendent to man the hospital single-handed for a period of about six months.²⁴ The adherence to the regulations of the Civil Servant was only to be expected and is reminiscent of the "modern" attitudes of Civil Servant administrators who, because of their attitudes, fail to grasp the necessity of bypassing standing regulations or protocols on situations of medical emergency.

References

1. Correspondence Book for Victoria Hospital for period 9 February 1886 to 26 February 1889, + 280 fol: 30 July 1887 letter no 145 fol 145; 1 August 1887 letter no 151 (cancelled) fol 149-156; 7 August 1887 letter no 152 fol 158-161; undated minute note following letter no 152 fol 161.
2. Colonial Estimates, Malta, 1876 Malta Government Gazette 20 December 1895, p.953, 956
3. On the 9 September 1886, the Medical Superintendent Dr. B.M. requested the Assistant Government Secretary for Gozo to grant him permission to leave his residence at Rabat at night for twenty days to go to his summer residence at Marsalforn. The emergency hospital duties were to be performed by the District Medical Officer for Rabat Dr. G.D., since the post of Resident Assistant Medical Officer had not yet been filled after the termination of employment of Dr. P.S. on the 30 April 1886. The hospital duties in the interim period had been performed solely by Dr. B.M. This request was acceded to. Correspondence Book, op. cit. note 1, 29 April 1886 letter no 32 fol 30; 30 April 1886 letter no 33 fol 31; 9 September 1886 letter no 65 fol 57; 9 September 1886 minute note following letter no 65 fol 57-58.
4. Every summer the Medical Superintendent requested permission to alter the time for the evening hospital rounds to enable him to go to his summer residence This request was regularly approved. Correspondence Book, *ibid*, 11 July 1887 letter no 142 fol 139.
5. Savona-Ventura C, A maternity unit in Gozo a hundred years ago. Essay awarded the MAM Essay prize 1992.
6. Correspondence Book, op. cit. note 1 above, 22 March 1887 letter no 114 fol 105.
7. Savona-Ventura, op. cit note 5 above.
8. Savona-Ventura, *ibid*.
9. Correspondence Book, op. cit note 1 above; Register of Admissions and Discharges for Lying-in Women, Victoria Hospital: 13 May 1884 to 30 April 1893, vol. 3 fol 71.
10. Correspondence Book, *ibid*.
11. Savona-Ventura, op. cit. note 5 above.
12. "La devo informare che questa notte, al tardi, il Medico Residente, Dr. NT..., avendo avuto bisogno, nello Ospedale, dell'assistenza di un altro medico, in un parto difficile, invece di chiamare me - sebbene a Marsalforno - o al medico Dist. Dr D..., chiamo per aiutarle il medico privato Dr. PS..." Correspondence Book, op. cit. note 1 above, 30 July 1887 letter no 148 fol 145.
13. "Il Dr. M..., nel breve discorso tenuto fra noi sull'ultimo incidente mi ha dichiarato che se io mi fossi valso dell'assistenza di un altro medico e non del Dr. S... la sarebbe stata una cosa compatibile. Per il che mi sorge il dubbio, anche secondo il rapporto da lui fatto, che le lagnanze sieno state fatta per parte sua solo perche io ho avuto l'assistenza del Dr. S..., cio che non avrebbe forse avuto luogo, ove io avessi avuto l'assistenza di un altro medico anche privato". Correspondence Book, *ibid*, 1 August 1887 letter no 151 (cancelled) fol 155-156.
14. Correspondence Book, *ibid*, 1 August 1887 letter no 151 (cancelled) fol 149-156; 7 August 1887 letter no 152 fol 158-161.
15. "Ma il Dr. M... si trovava allora assente da C. Vittoria, ed in villeggiatura a Marsalforno. A mezzanotte, mandare in cerca di una vettura con ordine espresso al vetturino di informare il Dr. M... a Marsalforno che si bisognava di lui in Ospedale, finche il Dr. M... potesse giugnere in Ospedale, almeno almeno sarebbero scorsi un ora e 30 minuti. E lasciare scorrea tanto tempo finche si fosse potuto incominciare a dare ajuto alla povera partoriente sarebbe stato secondo la mia misera opinione, un torto, una unumanita, una ingiustizia che avrebbero pesato assui grava sulla mia coscienza." Correspondence Book, *ibid*, 1 August 1887 letter no 151 (cancelled) fol 152-153.
16. "Il Dr. P... S..., medico privato, il quale allora si trovava a 5 passi di distanza dalla mia casa di abitazione ufficiale, e in Piazza S. Francesco, conosciuto da me l'imbarazzo in cui allora mi mettevano e il caso urgente e l'assenza del Dr. M... da C. Vittoria,

- spontaneamente si e offerto a prestarmi i suoi servizi." Correspondence Book, ibid, 1 August 1887 letter no 151 (cancelled) fol 153.
17. "... io non ho istruzioni ufficiali di ricorrere al Dr. D... qualora io aversi bisogno dell'assistenza del Dr. M... quando il chiamare quest'ultimo del luogo suo di villeggiatura posso lasciar scorrere tanto tempo da compromettere a parere mio, la urgenza del caso che richiedere pronta assistenza medica. E il mandare a chiamare il Dr. D... a mezzanotte, nel dubbio che, questi a quell'ora potesse trovarsi furi di C. Vittoria ad attendere ai suoi doveri come Medico Distrettuale ..." Correspondence Book, ibid, 1 August 1887 letter no 151 (cancelled) fol 154.
 18. Correspondence Book, ibid, undated Minute following letter no 152 fol 161.
 19. Correspondence Book, ibid, 17 August 1887 letter no 155 fol 164; 22 August 1887 minute following letter no 158 fol 168.
 20. Savona-Ventura, op. cit, note 5 above.
 21. Correspondence Book, op cit. note 1 above, 17 February 1886 letter no 7 fol 5; 22 September 1886 letter no 67 fol 60; 15 June 1887 letter no 134 fol 132; 7 September 1887 letter no 164 fol 173
 22. vide note 4 above.
 23. vide note 13 above.
 24. vide note 3 above.
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