

Gaetano Pieraccini: Public Health giant who created Italian Social Medicine

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ABSTRACT

It's well known all over the world that Italy is the birthplace of Bernardino Ramazzini (1633 - 1714), the real founder of occupational medicine, and that Italian doctors had a great importance in scientific and cultural development in occupational medicine. One of the most celebrated of them was Luigi Devoto, Professor of Medical Pathology at Pavia in 1901, who undertook a free course of Occupational medicine, creating in the same year the fortnightly journal "Work" - that became "Occupational medicine" since 1925 - and opening a Labour Clinic in Milan in 1910. In 1907 the first two Italian schools of occupational medicine arose in Milan and in Naples. In 1901 Guido Yule Giglioli wrote the first systematic treatise about workers' diseases. In this cultural background, Gaetano Pieraccini grew and developed his original cultural approach to the field of occupational medicine, which got from him a new dimension: the Social Medicine.

Key words: Social Medicine, Public Health, Workers' Health

Gaetano Pieraccini was a giant of the Italian Public Health panorama, just like others met in our History Corner [1-3]. He was born in Poggibonsi (Siena), December 23, 1864 and was orphaned when he was only six years old. He graduated in Medicine, on July 8, 1888, at the Higher Institute of Social Sciences in Florence. Afterwards he completed his studies in Paris and Wien and in 1893 he came back to Florence where he began to practice medicine at Santa Maria Nuova Hospital. In that time, Florence was a very rich cultural and scientific centre. At the end of the nineteenth century, Florence had already hospitals, modern laboratories and important medical scientists as Guido Banti, Pietro Grocco, Alessandro Lustig. Medical school in Florence ensured scientific training of many researchers maintaining a strong democratic inspiration, open to civil society needs. Therefore, Florence was the right place for a young doctor strongly oriented towards research as well as civic stances. Gaetano Pieraccini conjugated scientific orientation and political commitment. In Florence, in fact, he began to approach the socialist thought and joined Socialist Party. These two aspects, the rigor of the scientist and the political ardor, were always strongly represented in Pieraccini's work.

Gaetano published his first social medicine work, "La difesa della società dalle malattie trasmissibili" ("The defense of society from communicable diseases"), in 1895 [4]. He quickly became head of Santa Maria Nuova Hospital and in 1906

published his basic work: "Trattato di patologia del lavoro e terapia sociale" ("Treaty on Pathology of Work and Social Therapy") [5]. Only three years later, he got the first Professorship of Occupational Medicine in Italy.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in Italy, a new kind of occupational medicine developed which was gaining attention all over Europe. Italian doctors and scientists held important positions in companies and international health organizations. In 1901, Guido Yule Giglioli published the first systematic treaty on work diseases: "Notes of pathology and hygiene". In 1901 Luigi Devoto, Professor of Medical Pathology at Pavia got an Occupational Medicine course and founded in the same year the fortnightly "Il Lavoro" ("The Work") then "Medicina del Lavoro" ("Occupational Medicine"). A new and challenging scenario involved occupational physicians by high responsibility roles in large factories.

Italian scientists acknowledged that the concept of specific workers' disease brilliantly established by Ramazzini had remained for too much time as the one focus of occupational hygiene. Many modern treaties still were simply records of workers' typical clinical forms and recommended procedures as masks of defense or so. Guido Yule Giglioli concluded that new and modern studies on occupational disease had to be promoted and that predisposing factors had to be considered with great attention: "nutrition, rest, and working method should be studied by doctors with the same attention that lead or arsenic effects in the industries" he wrote [6].

These new trends were perfectly reflected in Gaetano Pieraccini studies. The preface of his treaty [5] is a true manifesto of his fundamental ideas: "Next to the individual medicine, the so-called practical medicine, a new branch of medical sciences has popped up and quickly grew. For her real nature, and theoretical and practical, it is called social medicine or political medicine". Pieraccini, as a Public Health prophet, imagined a new kind of medicine, not only for individuals but also for whole people, particularly for lower social classes workers, and thought about doctors as benefactors of the human community. Later, he gave a definition of social medicine: "What is this social or political medicine? It is a happy blend of hygiene and clinical. Its field of interest is in hospitals and workshops, among workers of the woods and fields; among the workers in mines and sea; between workers of the arm and thought; his cabinet of study is not so much the quiet scientist's laboratory, and more than the noisy factory worker and is in charge of the workers multitudes and is a prophylactic rather than curative medicine. Its therapies rather than in pharmacy jars, are preferably in state budgets. Its recipes rather than deal with patient's body have to relate to the social organism "[5].

Gaetano Pieraccini thought that the midst of poor and exploited proletariat suffering in the factories where it worked in industrial processing or agricultural activities could get a possible redemption by the consciousness of its right to obtain healthy works. The "social therapy" had to be applied by a legislation attentive to protect worker's body from poisons but also and especially to integrate organic defenses, too often weakened by a disproportionate effort respect to age (in the work of children), gender (in that of women), food (for all workers) [6]. He advocated a central role of science in shaping the proper development of social legislation and identified socialist politicians as necessary allied to ensure success of this perspective. In 1909 he was elected as Member of Parliament, a position he held until 1913 pledging to promote a number of legislative proposals for the grant of social insurance against sickness, disability and old age.

Gaetano Pieraccini was extremely sensitive to perceive and represent workers' suffering, as a good doctor who is in a daily contact with suffering people. In addition, he considered that it was necessary an alliance between workers' organizations and medical science to convince public opinion of the urgent need to put on it in action [6].

He led an investigation about the sanitary conditions of the workers' dormitories, collaborating with the union of railway workers. He also visited numerous pottery factories, always by trade union support and published the main results of his observations both in newspapers both in scientific journal as Ramazzini. At the peak of his action, he submitted a report to the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, Italian General Work Confederation) congress, in 1914, with Ludovico D'Aragona, general secretary of the organization, on the issues of social security for workers. He maintained fruitful and continuous relationships with physicians who worked in medical centers at Empoli, Abbadia San Salvatore, Montecatini, Val di Cecina, to bring his great experience in direct contact with the living environment of workers [6]. Pieraccini was also the author of original scientific researches on work physiology, workers' cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease in miners, mercurialism among the workers of Monte Amiata [7]. He was member of municipal and provincial Council of Florence in 1918 and he was appointed to the International Labour Office in Geneva. In 1921, he was elected deputy as socialist politician and the following year he joined the Socialist Unity Party. Because fascism was coming in action and Pieraccini was harshly opposed both politically and professionally, initially he was removed from the primary role in his hospital, and then he was prevented from teaching in his faculties. In 1925 he began to collaborate in the underground newspaper "Non mollare" ("Do not give up") by Gaetano Salvemini, Carlo and Nello Rosselli (then killed by fascists) and Ernesto Rossi (one of the fathers of the European Union). In 1930, he was served an order of confinement, later commuted to a year of political admonition.

However, he continued to carry out research. Pieraccini, in fact, wrote two important treaties, anticipating the issue that in the future will be defined Ergonomics: "Storia Naturale del Lavoro. Genealogia degli Arnesei ed Evoluzione della

Mano" published in 1944 [8], and "Anatomia e Fisiologia dell'Uomo che Lavora" ("Anatomy and Physiology of the Working Man") published in 1939 then revised and expanded in 1946 [9].

This research was the fruit of insulation in the laboratory in almost experimental conditions. The importance of this research also depends on being considered, rightly, precursor of scientific interest that recently saw a renewed vigor: the analysis of working postures. The study of work's anatomy, anthropology and physiology must be considered an important source of knowledge for designing place better working environment to get improvement of physical and psychological well being among workers.

Pieraccini described, in an interesting parallel between human evolution and external means to satisfy needs, the transformation of work tools and anatomic and physiologic modifications of the hand, from Stone Age to Iron Age. He studied the handle of rural and related tools (hammer, ax, knife) whose structural characteristics, because of their use, led to significant changes of the anatomy and physiology of human hands [6].

The technical support available for these studies was the photography and radiological examination. Reasoning about this phenomenon, the author theorized men adapting to machine or to environment. The ultimate goal of these researches or rather their "spiritual trend" was to "protect the health of the workers, to elevate more and more economic and moral conditions, to dignify the work of the arms". The vision of the relationship between health and work is clarified by the examination and, in some key points, Pieraccini criticized the works of Frederick W. Taylor, who, in his opinion, gave his studies an address too "strictly economic and neglects to consider individual anthropological element "[6].

In August 22, 1943, after the fall of fascism, Pieraccini reconstituted in his apartment the Florentine section of the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) and on 1 October of the following year, after the liberation of the city, he was elected mayor of Florence, a position he held for over two years. Florence was still in the rubble after the war and in Palazzo Vecchio he said: "We have our bourgeois University Studies. Even people must have its one, in the most beautiful place". The seat was the Palace of Guelph, perhaps the most beautiful place in Italy [10].

The tragedy of the Second World War stopped isolation in which fascism had forced Pieraccini and there was a paradox: within a few years after the war ended, the institutions built by fascism, particularly Enpi (Ente nazionale prevenzione infortuni: National Agency for Accidents Prevention) and Inail (Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro: National Institute for Insurance against Work Accidents) came back into vogue, denying the possibility of dissolution or radical reorganization that had circulated in the first phase of the post-war period, with great apprehension among most prominent occupational doctors. A discipline that, while the first fascism had branded as subversive, had then seen changing his fame in "fascistissima" (very fascist). This paradox clearly appears in concerned words wrote by Pieraccini in a letter of November 1944: "Do you know that here in Rome teachers say that the occupational health matters are fascist matters [6]?"

This octogenarian man saw continuity between before and after the war, rather than a break, in the field of occupational medicine. At the same time, the Work Inspectorate remained relegated to a secondary role, because it had limited means and directed to the strict respect of compatibility between industrial effort for reconstruction and compliance with legal standards. With the enthusiasm of a young man, Gaetano came among the rubble, to animate the workers, to hasten the work: for the rebirth, in the most beautiful location, of the People's University of Florence. This was his socialism: working for the people in the most dignified way, for the elevation of the people, trying to improve people's living conditions, teaching people that health is the first and most sacred right. Later, in 1948 he was elected senator in the Socialist Unity lists and became one of the candidates in the elections for the presidency of the Republic in which Luigi Einaudi was elected.

Gaetano Pieraccini died in Florence on April 13, 1957. He was a legend: famous and poor. Someone still remembered that when he was going to climb the stairs of the Palazzo Vecchio to be proclaimed Mayor of Florence, in the evening, at dinner, in his pot, it boiled only a few potatoes. When he was called for a medical consultation, not even in nearby locations, to visit some poor person he gruffly said: "no problem, I had to pass there..." and walked there and refused any compensation [10].

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