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La corrispondenza va indirizzata a: S. Arieti, Cattedra di Storia della Medicina, Policlinico Sant'Orsola, Via Massarenti n. 9, 40138 Bologna.

Articoli/Articles

DENTISTRY IN ITALY IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND
EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES - AN INTRODUCTION TO
RESEARCH

LANMARCO LAQUIDARA

Comitato per l'Istituzione della Società Italiana di Storia dell'Odontoiatria

SUMMARY

In the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries the conditions of dental practice are well enough clear. Even in this period the profession continued to be practiced mostly by empirics whose training consisted of an apprenticeship carried out for varying lengths of time under some itinerant practitioner. Nevertheless in the late Eighteenth century resident dentists with stable living quarters began to appear in ever-increasing number. In this work the author gives examples of several events and advertisements who prove the just exposed assertions.

In the history of medicine, the late 1700's and the years immediately following constitute a period so rich in innovation and change that *it is not easy for the physician of our day to imagine the revolution which the various procedures then in fashion and dispute brought to the field of medicine*¹. In the field of stomatology as well, the century of the Enlightenment had introduced significant changes, producing a clear evolution of theory as well as of everyday practice.

The eighteenth century, G. Gambacorta rightly affirms, saw the birth of true dentistry, conceived as a professional art. The difference between the knowledge of this period and that of the preceding century was truly striking, as is evident in the increased

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quality and specificity of the texts in print. There was quite a remarkable development of research...whose results were systematically applied in practice². But although this observation is certainly valid in an overall view, we cannot assume that the concept is automatically applicable as well to the individual realities of different countries. In this regard, in fact, the situation in Italy does not appear entirely to match that of the rest of Europe; specifically, there is evidence of Italy's considerably late development in comparison with neighbouring France.

Despite significant contributions made to the profession by various scholars throughout the eighteenth century³, in the late 1700's, empiricism still ruled unchallenged on our peninsula, and good dental surgeons were still an exception everywhere.

Among the Italian dentists worthy of being remembered for their knowledge as well as for their skill, many had studied and practiced abroad. This was the case, for example, of Bartolomeo Ruspini⁴, M. Maggiolo⁵, and Giuseppangelo Fonzi⁶. The names of those who, practicing their profession in their native country, have left clear traces of themselves in the history of the advancement of dentistry can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Even among these few, we find those who managed to reach high professional and scientific standards only after previous experience of pure, quackish empiricism.

This was the case of Vittorio Cornelio. The everyday and professional life of this author, destined to distinguish himself for his acumen, creativity, and skill, in itself provides some of the most illuminating evidence of what, in most cases, was involved in the training of those who worked in dental care. In 1767, the anonymous [Italian] translator of Etienne Bourdet's *Easy Treatments for a Clean Mouth and Teeth*, traced, in his preface, an interesting picture of common practices in stomatology in late eighteenth century Italy, showing how the profession (but in this specific case it might be better to say *trade*) was solely in the hands of quacks and inexpert people, who were not qualified to write out a series of observations and instructions

precise and correct enough to inform, even moderately, a young person inclined to study it. In Italy, affirmed the writer, there were no texts on the subject; so French texts had to be translated, and these were not easily available on our peninsula. *Given the sensible doctrines..., as well as the variety of practices, I have demonstrated how abundantly useful this research could be, and how many serious difficulties it could avoid, if it were introduced in Italy...⁷*. Campani, considered the most famous Italian dentist of the eighteenth century, also claimed that in Italy there were no opportunities for learning the art of dentistry except by training oneself under a quack. In his *Dentistry*, which he claimed he had written *to treat this subject in its entirety... since in this Italy of ours we have not yet seen any school established to deal expressly with... one of the most important branches of surgery*, he wrote, in fact, that *whoever wants to take up this profession should do an apprenticeship with a skilled and experienced master...⁸*. Similar comments were offered by Vittorio Cornelio in 1793. Before being *approved by the University of Turin* and becoming *dental surgeon of the King of Sardinia*, he was, as he himself relates in his autobiography, a comic and a swordsman, a hermit and a quack. As a youth he had learned the art of dentistry from Michele Acardi and from Monsieur Pomer, two charlatans who *performed* in southern Italy; he had practiced his manual skill and developed some basic notions where and when the opportunity arose⁹. The role played by educational institutions in Cornelio's training was limited to an examination he took in Turin with Professors Baldi (of Surgical Anatomy) and Penchienati (of Practical Surgery) in order to get the practicing license required by the Constitutions for the University of Turin in 1777¹⁰. As at the beginning of the century, therefore, whoever wanted to become a *dentist* had no other choice but to turn to an itinerant practitioner or to one of those empirics who was somehow able to keep a fixed residence, perhaps combining his income from this profession with earnings from some other activity¹¹.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Even at the end of the eighteenth century, the transmission of knowledge in this field took place as it did in the crafts, directly from master to apprentice. We have numerous descriptions of the picturesque practices of these empirics, which involved gallstone operations, cataracts, and several other kinds of minor surgical operations, as well as the sale of various more or less *miraculous* preparations. Among these descriptions, besides the ones provided by Cornelio himself, we have those in the writings of R. Babini, A. Chiappelli, A. Corsini, N. Latronico, and the very beautiful iconographic evidence presented in a recent book by M. Romagnoli¹².

Some of these practitioners have left clear and reliable testimony, and we feel we should cite at least the most famous. To the first half of the eighteenth century belong Buonafede Vitali, known as *the Anonymous*¹³, Giuseppe Colombani, known as *l'Alfieri Lombardo*¹⁴ Vincenzo Santichi, known as *il Turchetto*, Antonio Chiaurendi, known as *il Franzesino*, and finally Domenico Cuminaccio, Giovanni Crespo, and a certain Natta¹⁵.

Quite a few of those who practiced dentistry were monks, who quietly worked in the interest of suffering humanity but also for the financial benefit of their monasteries. Among these monks, a certain Fra' Ilarione should be mentioned, an Observant of St. Joseph of Brescia; in the State Archives of Venice there is a request of his for authorization to sell a certain *Balsamic Vulnerary Water*¹⁶.

In the second half of the century, there were quite a few figures who left traces of themselves in archives or in the works of contemporary authors. Giovanni Greggi, known as *the Cosmopolitan*, is among the most famous. During his wanderings from one Italian or foreign city to another, he sold tooth remedies and showed great manual skill. In 1769 he was, for example, in Venice, where he submitted a request for authorization to sell various preparations, including a *dental powder to whiten teeth* and a *water against scurvy*¹⁷. In the second half of the eighteenth century, there were numerous empirics practic-

ing in Venice. In the State Archives of the city on the Lagoon, many requests for authorization of diverse dental remedies have been preserved; aside from giving us details about the composition of these remedies, they have handed down the names of some of these practitioners. We thus know that in 1760 Carlo Pelizzoni and Francesco Albanese were selling, a *Pleasant Balsam* against toothache *which had the honor of receiving authorization even in other cities in Italy*; in 1761, Andrea della Vecchia extolled the virtues of certain *Spirits of Flowers* *which are useful in alleviating the pain of decayed teeth and are applied with cotton-wool soaked in the above-mentioned spirits, after having cleaned the decayed tooth*; in 1762, Giovanni Battista Masgomieri advertised a certain *Tooth Preserve* to be taken in the form of *small tablets* against toothache; in 1768, Giuseppe Marliani suggested soaking a bit of cotton-wool in his *Experimental Balsam, or rather, Elixir* and *applying it above the aching tooth*; in 1770, Giorgio Giustini offers his services as a *dental surgeon...to extract teeth, overlying teeth, covered roots; to whiten, clean, straighten, and put in natural-looking false teeth* in 1774, Lorenzo Florian was distributing a remedy to *clean decayed teeth and stop pain*; in the same year, Chiara Masieri, widow of the late Andrea Negri praised the virtues of a solution against toothache also approved by the surgeon Alvisè Mercè; in 1776, Carlo Testa was selling a *wash to preserve Teeth and clean Gums*¹⁸. Another empiric of whom we still have detailed information is Angelo Faustini. Like many other *charlatans*, he practiced in Rome at the end of the eighteenth century and had a regular license, obtained in 1779. Some of his advertisements inform us that the *very well-known dental surgeon*, as he liked to call himself, besides preparing dyes and powders for the treatment of gums and teeth, and aside from doing extractions and putting in bridges, made hernia bands, performed surgical operations, treated *the illness called Syphilis or Venereal Disease*, and sold a special *Balsam for Injuries*. But in practicing his profession he did not follow the regulations set by medical authorities. He distributed posters and public notices without authoriza-

tion, made his *preparations* without the collaboration or approval of the Chief Medical Examiner, and above all did not pay the taxes involved. In August 1790, he was therefore put to trial for abuse of the license that had been granted him, but we do not know the outcome of the trial¹⁹.

There is interesting information in the State Archives in Milan as well. Of particular significance are some aspects of the professional life of Angelo Cardini Beati, *pork-butcher and professional dentist approved by government decree of the 11th of July 1760*, who, in 1785, submitted an official report to health officials, denouncing a case of unlawful professional practice. The accused was *Steffano Penati, an oblate of the cross-bearers of St. Thomas in Mantua*, who despite various warnings continued to practice *with the backing of Doctor and Physicist Gasperini*. Apart from the supposed *notorious inexpertise* (Cardini's words are certainly not disinterested) of the friar, it is interesting to note how, as early as the late 1700's, the phenomenon of unlawful practice began, in some cases, paving the way for the institution of a *medical collaborator*²⁰. In the same period, in Milan, a certain *Professor Pellegrino, dental surgeon* practiced; in a notice, with no date, preserved in the Municipal Print Collection, he claims he can guarantee his clients *facts and not words*. But in reality his promises appear a bit extravagant to our eyes, when he guarantees that he can turn teeth alabaster white simply by putting two fingers in the mouth, or when he claims he can operate in the mouth without causing pain²¹. Also in the late 1700's, Maurizio Maria Olmi, of Leghorn, was practicing the profession in Milan; in addition, he served for ten years as surgeon for the Tuscan troops, and there are still traces of his activity in Florence²². He applied to the Milanese authorities for permission to sell a *marvellous preparation to cure even the most acute tooth pains... making them stop within a few minutes, with the certainty that the teeth will never ache again*²³. The *Gazzetta di Bologna* provides us with interesting information about a certain Pinelli and about Gaspare Monteventi. The former sold various preparations in several

Italian cities, and of his activity we have an announcement which appeared in the above-mentioned journal in 1792. *The chemist Mr. Pinelli, who lives in a hotel and therefore has no permanent residence in Bologna, advertises, together with some substances for washing, stain-removing, polishing, and gluing diverse materials, a powder for cleaning teeth which removes dental calculus, strengthens gums, and makes teeth very white without corroding them*²⁴. Towards the end of 1795, the same *Gazzetta di Bologna* published two announcements by Gaspare Monteventi who was selling a solution against toothache capable of stopping pain instantly, and if taken repeatedly manages to dry up the nerve, saving the patient from the painful operation of having his decayed tooth extracted. The same Monteventi, who for many years has practiced the dental profession in this city...also sells everything needed to keep teeth healthy and clean, such as *Opiate, Brushes, Chinese Sticks, etc. He also manufactures... elastic bands*²⁵.

Similar information can be found in the press in Florence. From the *Gazzetta Toscana* we learn the names of a few dentists who had their permanent residence and practiced their profession in Florence. Among these was Maurizio Olmi of Leghorn, of whose activity there are also traces in Milan, and who, in the capital of the Grand Duchy, sold a *Holy Balsam* which in less than five minutes could eliminate any kind of toothache²⁶. Pier Francesco Vannini sold *an opiate to preserve the teeth*²⁷. Jacopo Niccoli of Pistoia boasted of being *an expert tooth and root extractor*, and of having great skill in *putting in false teeth*²⁸. We must also mention, among resident practitioners, Antonio Gasperi and Gaetano Casali; in 1768 the latter took over the direction of the surgery of a certain dentist named Carini, who had died shortly before²⁹. The *Gazzetta Universale*, a journal active at the end of the eighteenth century, informs us, furthermore, that the chemist Pinelli, *known in Venice, Milan, Bologna, Vienna, and in various other cities of Europe*, practiced his profession for some time in Florence as well³⁰.

SICURO E PORTENTOSO RIMEDIO
ALLA ODONTALGIA

O S I A

DOLORE DEI DENTI

ED A VARJ MALI DERIVANTI DA RISTAGNO
D'UMORI, DA AFFEZIONI NERVOSE EC.

SCOPERTO DAL REVERENDISSIMO SIGNORE

TEODORO CLEMENTE COMPARINI

ABATE DI S. MARTINO IN CAMPO, PROTONOTARO
APOSTOLICO, E VICARIO FORANEO DI PISTOJA EC.
SOCIO ORDINARIO DELLA REALE ACCADEMIA
ECONOMICA DI FIRENZE

Esposto nell'Adunanza del dì 18. Settembre 1793.



IN FIRENZE MDCCXCIII.

PER GAETANO CAMBIAGI STAMP. GRANDUCALE

CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI.

Fig. 3

In 1771, the above-cited *Gazzetta Toscana* published the announcement of a certain Salvatore Desperati, who boasted of having invented a new instrument for extractions; in 1783, that of a certain Habert, *depository of many secret remedies* for cleaning teeth, strengthening them, protecting them from scurvy, calming toothaches, and fixing natural and artificial teeth; in 1792, that of Alessandro Granati, who *extracts teeth in Piazza del Granduca with his eyes blindfolded and while sitting on one of his horses*. The same journal carries news of the activity of Carlo Castiglione of Milan *excellent dental surgeon...approved by the best universities of Europe*, who was to become the dental surgeon of the Grand Duke. One of the procedures he practiced was *pulling a tooth from a child's mouth and implanting it in the mouth of an adult*³¹. There is also a printed announcement of 1785 informing us that Filippo Pistoiesi made dentures in bone and ivory at a low cost³². Similarly, in 1788, *Signor di Sirabode* praised the virtues of a decoction to *preserve and whiten teeth*; in 1790, 1791, and 1792, the San Giorgio spice shop in Piazza San Niccolò announced that it had made available to the public the *wonderful mouthwash of Orghimuth for toothache and scurvy*; in 1795, Salvatore de Borgio of Palermo was selling a decoction which *besides whitening teeth, heals even those which were not born deaf*³³. Information of an interesting and detailed nature has come down to us regarding Turin, one of the few Italian cities which has been able to profit from the research carried out by various illustrious historians of dentistry. In the shadow of the *Mole*, as elsewhere, empirics and vendors of toothache-remedies went about their business amid the numerous *approved dentists* to be found in the city. The *Constitutions of His Majesty for the University of Turin* of 1772 provided that, in order to practice, lithotomists, dentists, and ophthalmologists had to *be approved by means of those experiments which the Reform will prescribe* and that they too had to present *their licenses, just as surgeons have been instructed to do*.

In order to get a license *the candidate will be examined for an hour in that field of surgery which he intends to practice, and he will perform experiments pertinent to that field; the examiners will be the Prior and the two Professors of Surgery*³⁴. We learn from a *New Guide to the City of Turin* of 1781 that *the dentists approved by the Royal University since 1734 are ten: Gaetano Casali of Lucca, Giovanni D'Acquino of Naples, Giuseppe Bertero of Turin, Antonio Pietro Pastorini of Piacenza, Carlo Bassi of Milan, Giov. Francesco Berta of Anzonico (Switzerland), Gaudenzio Maione, known as Boschetti, of Casale, Gio. Domenico Gianini of Lucca, Giovanni De Benedetti of Rome, and Pietro Mariano of Venice*³⁵. Thus there were quite a few of them for a city which at the time had about 80,000 inhabitants; we do not know, however, whether they all practiced continuously in the capital of the Kingdom of Savoy.

It should be noted, moreover, that at that time it was very unusual to turn to a dentist for treatment. Many patients relied on the resources of homemade cures, on that *spiritual heritage entrusted to the meisinoire (charlatans) or to elderly people in the family who were regarded as having a particularly vast store of wisdom*³⁶. Among the names cited, that of Vittorio Cornelio does not appear (at the time he was perhaps practicing in Tuscany), nor does that of Pietro Sales (who had not yet received his diploma); they would later become foremost figures in Turinese dentistry, and are mentioned in various sources, including the *Giornale degli Avvisi*, in the issues of June 2 and March 24 1792, for Cornelio and Sales respectively. Some practitioners lived and worked for some time in rooming houses or in rented apartments³⁷; others stably occupied stalls or small living quarters, but were not above going down for a few hours into the square where it was easier to earn money; still others worked exclusively in the open air, on a raised platform with a noisy and attractive entourage. With the exception of Vittorio Cornelio, who, together with Antonio Campani, would turn out to be the most interesting figure of the end of the 1700's (and early 1800's) in Italy, the other doctors mentioned were merely

modest practitioners animated principally by the idea of making a decent living from their own work, just like other dentists, after all, active between 1780 and 1810. Of these a few deserve mention, such as the Orcorte, Carlo Ferrari (Count of Nice), and Alessandro d'Espín, who was able, he claimed, to *apply complete dentures which can chew even the hardest crust*³⁸.

But at the time very few people could afford to buy dentures. Most of the population relied, when the need arose, on homemade cures, and on the whole, activity in the field remained limited and disorganized, for which the authorities are partly to blame. One example of how the authorities were in part responsible for this situation is afforded us by a significant bureaucratic affair which occurred in Milan in 1776. In that year, a well-known Milanese dental surgeon, a certain Antonio Mantegazza del Bene, temporarily employed by the King of Poland, wrote to the hospital administration of the city of Milan, offering his services. The Faculty of Medicine, consulted on the matter, replied through its director Dr. Cicognini, expressing the opinion that the dental surgeon should be hired. In Milan, as in all of Italy in fact, *the treatment of tooth maladies was mostly left to ignorant practitioners from out of town or to anyone with some experience in the common practice of extracting them, and so it would be opportune to be able to invite Mantegazza to return to his homeland and make him Professor of Dentistry, not only at the Luogo Pio di Santa Corona...but even more importantly at the Ospedale Maggiore, so that he could train students in his art*³⁹. Thus, clearly, the Faculty of Medicine did not limit itself to deploring the situation in which the profession found itself in that day; instead, fully aware of the need to have dentistry set up as an officially taught subject, it seized the opportunity to make a proposal and play a progressive and responsible role.

But unfortunately the Austrian Government, with whom lay the final decision, expressed, through its representative the Prince of Kaunitz, an unfavorable opinion, considering it premature to think of hiring a dental surgeon when a school

of general surgery had yet to be organized. Dental illnesses were, after all, *easily cured everywhere*, and, moreover, it was inopportune to burden the Luogo Pio di Santa Corona with expenses for the maintenance of a specialist of *such a mildly destructive disease*⁴⁰.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is on the whole quite clear what the conditions of dental practice were in Italy at the end of the 1700's. A detailed reconstruction of particular aspects of everyday methods and of the various local situations would require, of course, specific studies in depth. But the documentation found in this preliminary phase of research shows that in Italy, even at the end of the eighteenth century, the profession continued to be practiced mostly by empirics whose training consisted of an apprenticeship carried out for varying lengths of time under some itinerant practitioner. In this period, nevertheless, *resident* dentists with stable living quarters began to appear in ever-increasing numbers; in the big cities, above all, there came to be many of them. The lives and the publications of some Italian *dentists* of the time (Campani, Cornelio) also demonstrate that, even on our peninsula, highly qualified practitioners were forming, capable of setting an example which would have a positive impact on the entire field. Market-place tooth-drawers and true dentists lived together, therefore, at an historical moment characterized by what was surely considerable, evolutionary activity, which permits us to share, in substance, Christine Hillam's view that the years between 1780; and 1810 were a *pivotal period*.

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39. STATE ARCHIVES OF MILAN, Sanità. Parte antica, envelope 274. On the subject: LATRONICO N., *Dentisti e Cavadenti ...* op., cit., p. 774 ss.
40. Ibidem.

La corrispondenza va inviata a: L. Laquidara - Via Cavour, 8 - 54033 Carrara (MS).

Recensioni/Essay Reviews

GOLDANIGA Giacomo - MARCHETTI Gianpietro, *Vita e opera dello scienziato e senatore camuno Camillo Golgi (Premio Nobel per la Medicina nel 1906)*. Tipolitografia lineografica - Boario Terme (Bs), 1993, pp. 332.

Nel 1993 ricorre il centocinquantenario anniversario della nascita di quell'insigne scienziato che fu Camillo Golgi, una gloria italiana di cui Stato ed Atenei avrebbero dovuto orgogliosamente avvertire il dovere morale di rievocare la luminosa figura. Invece, almeno finora, di Camillo Golgi si sono ricordati soltanto i suoi conterranei dimostrando che l'affetto, nell'indelebilità del ricordo, è un sentimento che sovrasta in valori trascendenti l'obiettiva riconoscenza che almeno i ricercatori di estrazione biologica e medica avrebbero dovuto dimostrare: il nome dello scienziato è, infatti, legato alla scoperta di importantissime strutture presenti in ogni cellula ed, in particolare, al riconoscimento delle basi strutturali morfologiche del funzionamento delle cellule nervose.

In un elegante volume di 332 pagine, riccamente illustrato, edito con la sponsorizzazione di enti locali quali il Comune di Corteno Golgi, la comunità montana della Valcamonica, la Banca Popolare di Brescia, il Bacino Imbifero di Valcamonica e l'Associazione camuna Ricerca ed assistenza medica, Giacomo Goldaniga, storiografo, e Gianpietro Marchetti, medico, hanno con amore ed intelligenza tracciato una biografia del Golgi che nel suo insieme appare completa e doviziosamente documentata. Il libro, che inizia con una prefazione non priva di polemica perché riporta le parole di un docente universitario di storia della scienza che in occasione di un ciclo di conferenze su *Le frontiere della Scienza*, tenutosi a Brescia nel 1989, osò definire un illustre sconosciuto colui che viene considerato il precursore delle neuroscienze contemporanee, si articola in dodici capitoli ed in un'appendice nel corso dei quali sono analizzati del Golgi i più salienti dati biografici ricercati con amorosa attenzione,