

In the steps of Hospes

F.G. Vescia

Summary

This brief review traces the evolution of hospitals from their origins to the present.

Résumé

Cette brève revue retrace l'évolution des hôpitaux des origines à nos jours.

We are in a period of transition. Hospitals are merging, becoming conglomerates of H.M.O.'s (* Health Maintenance Organizations: medical groups providing health care services for insured subscribers) or occasionally shrinking in size. Sometimes to our surprise they simply disappear.

The term hospital comes from the Latin word *hospes*, or guest, as a guest that is taken into one's home. From '*hospes*' came the words hospice, hospitable, hospitality, hospitalism, hospitalization, to hospitalize, host, hostel, hostelry, ostler and ultimately hotel.

A hospital, according to the latest edition of *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*, is "an institution for the treatment, care and cure of the sick and wounded, for the study of disease, and for the training of physicians, nurses and allied health personnel." (1)

How and where did hospitals begin? According to Buddhist scholars a hospital was built in Ceylon by Gautama Siddharta and his son Upatiso around 437 B.C. In the third century B.C., in the reign of King Ashoka, the Hindus built eighteen hospitals that provided an advanced level of public care, including the use of daily baths, exercises, the administration of

Fernando G. Vescia, M.A. M.D., 1629 Edgewood Dr.,
Palo Alto, CA. 94303, U.S.A.
E-mail: FVescia@aol.com

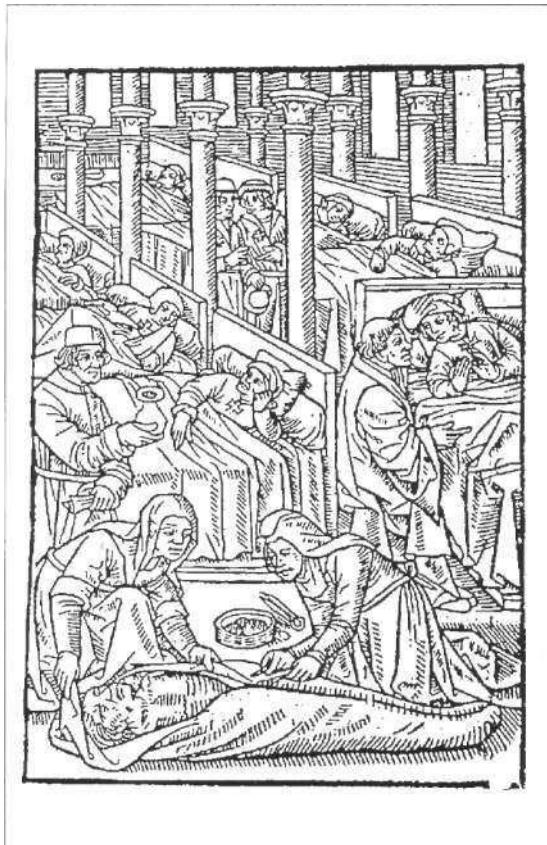
medicinal herbs and the performance of surgical procedures.(2) Some historians question these claims for lack of adequate documentation.

The Greeks believed illness was a punishment of the gods and relied on incantations hoping to appease them. Their physicians practiced their art in medical temples called *Asklepieia*, named after the physician Asklepios who had provoked Zeus's ire for having depopulated the underworld. Clearly their medical temples were not hospitals in our sense of the word.

Pragmatic, disdainful of physical pain and suspicious of Greek philosophy, the Romans built *valetudinaria*. These substantial structures, never more than ten days' march from the troops in the field, were designed to serve wounded or ailing legionnaires so they might recover and rejoin their divisions to fight another day, hence their appellation of "get well places." It was not until centuries later that civilian *valetudinaria* were introduced in Rome and other parts of the Roman Empire. (3)

When Fabiola, a penitent Christian lady, opened her home to the sick in 380 A.D., she epitomized Christian charity. More homes to take care of the sick (*nosochomia*) and strangers (*xenodochia*) followed, all in the name of Christ.(4)

Reproduction of a woodcut from St. Gelais' *Le Vergier d'Honneur*, French School, ca. 1500 showing a hospital interior.



The most efficient of these early institutions was the hospital at Gondi Shapur. It was built in the middle of the sixth century A.D. by the followers of Nestorius, the deposed bishop of Constantinople, who had migrated to that area in 430 A.D. in search of a safe haven. From such humble beginnings came the inspiration for the great Mohammedan *Bimaristans*: the Al Walid Ibn el Malik of Baghdad, built in 707 A.D., the el Adoudi of Damascus in 900 A.D. and al Qalawun erected in Cairo in 1285 A.D. These hospitals delivered a high level of care, including minimal surgery (cautery, circumcision, incision of abscesses and extraction of cataracts) consistent with the injunction of the Koran against mutilation of the body. For the first time they included a pavilion for the insane referred to in a spirit of compassion as "God's Innocents."(5)

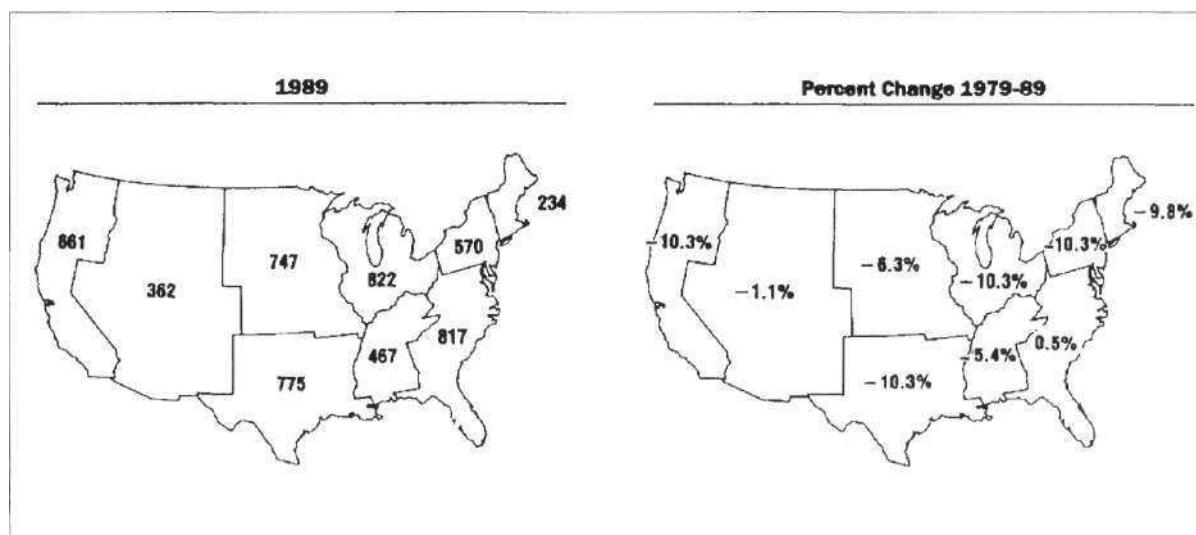
The first important hospital in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire was the *Pantokrator Xenon* (literally: "The Ruler of All" Hospital), erected in Constantinople in 1136 A.D., under the Emperor John Komnenos. It consisted of fifty beds, arranged in *ordino* or sections, under the care of two physicians. Four additional physicians worked in the outpatient department and two others in a special infirmary for the use of the monks.(6) In 1204 A.D., the hospital was sacked by the Christian knights of the fourth Crusade, a forerunner of today's internecine wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The *Pantokrator Xenon* survived the sacking and continued to function as a hospital until the knights were expelled in 1261 A.D. and the Byzantine Emperor reinstated. It remained a thriving institution until 1453, when Constantinople fell to the forces of the Ottoman Empire.

In the Western section of the Roman Empire, the hospital model was that of *Santo Spirito* in Rome, commissioned in 1198 A.D. by Pope Innocent III. Operating under the rule of St. Benedict, it was the precursor of many other institutions by the same name: *Holy Ghost* in the English Isles, *Heilige Geist* in Germany and *Saint Esprit* in France. "By 1300," according to Mary Risley, "there were two hundred European hospitals with this name, and by 1400 there were more than nine hundred."(7)

Over the centuries, more and more hospitals, lay and religious, were built. As time went on they became increasingly specialized. In the last fifteen years some U.S. hospitals became too expensive to operate. Several were forced to close down. Their number dwindled from 6,965 hospitals in 1980 to 6,291 in 1995, a drop of about ten per cent.

Translated in beds the figures were even more impressive, 1,365,000 beds in 1980 as opposed to 1,081,000 in 1995, a drop of about 20 per cent.(8) These reductions affected primarily nonprofit and U.S. Government hospitals, to the

Distribution of Community Hospitals by U.S. Census Region



benefit of investor owned hospitals whose numbers increased instead.(9) Another reason for the reduction of hospital beds has been the development of surgicenters for ambulatory surgical patients and of hospices for the care of the dying and terminally ill.

Like early *valetudinaria* designed for Roman legionnaires, some U.S. hospitals today are not open to all comers. Ailing citizens are denied access if they are not part of an H.M.O. or unable to pay for their services. So much for the word *hospes*. VALE.

References

1. Stedman's Medical Dictionary, 26th edition (1996,) Baltimore, Philadelphia, Hong Kong, London, Munich, Sydney, Tokyo: Williams & Wilkins p. 810
2. MacEachern, M.J. (1969), Hospital Organization and Management, Brynn, III.: Physicians Record Co. p.2
3. Pazzini, A. (1958), L'Ospedale nei Secoli Rome: Edizione Orizzonte Medico, p.24
4. Allbutt,T.C. (1921), Greek Medicine in Rome London. McMillan & Co Ltd.

Hamarneh,S. (1962), Development of Hospitals in Islam *Journal of the History of Medical and Allied Sciences* 17(3):381

Miller Timothy S. (1985) *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, p.14.

Risley Mary (1961) *House of Healing, The Story of the Hospital*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Co., Inc. p.78

Goldsmith Jeff Charles (1981), *Can Hospitals Survive? The New Competitive Health Care Market*, Homewood, Ill., Dow Jones-Irwin

American Hospital Assoc. : personal telephone communication 11/6/97

10. American Hospital Association report of 1990-1991 p. xxxIII.

Biography

Dr. Fernando G. Vescia is a lecturer in the History of Medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, California. He is an emeritus clinical associate professor and the author of several articles in the History of Medicine and in Gastroenterology.