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Tuberculosis has left its mark on Swiss history

Against the cruel angel of death

Schiller, Kafka, Gorky, Breughel and Chopin are all supposed to have had the "white plague". Tuberculosis has scarred the destinies of people and of countries. Switzerland was a pioneer in the struggle against this scourge. Its first public health clinic, at Heiligenschwendi, is 100 years old.

Tuberculosis was a disease which struck rich and poor alike in dreadful numbers. It was also known as consumption, or the wasting disease. It literally hollowed people out. Tuberculosis comes from the Latin word for a

Alice Baumann

swelling. It spread via the glands. Emaciation, coughing, extreme fatigue and fever were the symptoms of infection. In most cases the lungs were attacked first. But the bacillus could also lodge itself in other organs or joints. Strangely enough it was not particularly painful. Tuberculosis gave its sufferers a "noble death", as the saying went.

This is how authors like Thomas Mann (*The Magic Mountain*) and Alexandre Dumas (*La Dame aux Camélias*) saw it. In their novels people were consumed with fever and became sick from very despair. In the nineteenth century tuberculosis was seen as the disease of disappointed love.

The dangerous cough

Since tuberculosis spread more and more dramatically as the plague had done at an earlier period, measures had to be taken in Switzerland too – in such a way that the rich alone would not benefit. In Canton Berne a group of outspoken inhabitants made the following proposal in 1892: "The occasion of the approaching great patriotic festival – the 600th anniversary of the founding of the Confederation and the 700th anniversary of the founding of the City of Berne – could be used to set up a public health clinic for tuberculosis patients without means as a lasting memorial of this jubilee year, which is

of two-fold importance for Canton Berne".

The appeal was heard. In 1895 the Berne Tuberculosis Clinic opened its doors at Heiligenschwendi above Thun. At that time consumption was responsible for 15% of all deaths in Canton Berne. 90% of the population carried the disease. The worst affected were young people aged 19.

The "Blue Henry" spitting bottle

The term public health clinic was used to make a distinction from the sanatoria patronised by the wealthy. The restricted world of the deckchair in the public



health clinic replaced the great parks and far-flung surroundings of the private sanatorium. The spittoon called the Blue Henry, which was also used as a pocket spitting bottle, was the first and most important hygiene measure. It was strictly forbidden to spit on the ground. This had considerable effect, although at the time the cause of the illness was not known.

Animal experiments showed that the so-called "cruel angel of death tuberculosis" was an infectious disease. In 1882 Robert Koch, who was later to win a Nobel Prize, succeeded in cultivating the tuberculosis bacillus. Intensive research began to find a cure.

Poor instructions, incorrect dosages and sloppy application methods meant that the tuberculin vaccine did not work. The disease continued to be treated by attempting to increase the body's immunity with fresh-air cures at high-altitude sanatoria.

Research and new treatment methods were finally successful. In the 1950s the old type of clinic was transformed into a diagnostic and therapeutic hospital specialising in internal medicine; the fight

against tuberculosis was coming to an end. Thanks to new methods it became possible to attack the tuberculosis bacillus directly. In 1957 Heiligenschwendi started a revolution in Switzerland: the sacking of the deckchair. Treatment by rest – which was more holy than healing – was replaced by physiotherapy in conjunction with breathing and therapeutic exercises.

In 1978 Heiligenschwendi closed its last tuberculosis ward. This was the end of an era which had lasted 83 years in which this high-altitude clinic played a leading role in the struggle against tuberculosis in Europe. In 1993, however, 15 tuberculosis patients were again admitted to the hospital, and in the same

year 144 new cases, of which 105 were bacillary, were reported by the cantonal doctor.

A modern after-care clinic

Today Heiligenschwendi has a high reputation as a post-operation multi-purpose medical centre. 100 years after it was established the Bernese high-altitude clinic is a modern rehabilitation hospital using the latest cardiological and pneumological therapy methods. Its daily life revolves around patients with heart, circulation, asthma and lung complaints.

The clinic has more patients today than at any time in its history, with about 2,000 admissions a year. Its many exercise groups and swimming classes make it look like a sports centre. But we have to be careful. Reports from the United States have reached Europe that tuberculosis is raising its ugly head once more amongst the poorer sections of the population. They say there is still no effective medicament against it – it would not be profitable... ■