Health and well-being through the eyes of Bernardino Ramazzini, the father of occupational medicine

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Abstract

The well-being of leaders represents a complex responsibility for their private doctors. Bernardino Ramazzini, known as the founder of occupational medicine, drew the attention on the essential role of a doctor to preserve the health of social leaders and other people form the upper class society. This paper reviews Ramazzini’s observations, from the early seventeenth century, on the health of high ranking people of his time. To teach these people how to keep their health was mentioned in one of Ramazzini’s rather unknown work. His work focused on the role of the doctor and on the particular preventative measures for the health and the treatment of high ranking people. From this point of view, the book gained a more contemporary meaning. Living in a healthy environment, keeping moderation in eating and drinking, having a daily exercise schedule, a good personal hygiene and a healthy sleep schedule, and cultivating self-control are the preventative key points exposed in this book. The key to success is the continuous medical education of the private doctors. These rules are still valid today and not only for the health of the leaders or people of wealthy backgrounds.

Keywords: Bernardino Ramazzini, occupational medicine, disease prevention, health among leaders, hygiene, obesity, food regime, chronic diseases, public health.

Politicians leading the country, leaders connected to a company or organisation, spiritual leaders or generally people who have leadership roles in their lives should be in a good health. There are some articles on leadership and health, but these evaluate changes in patient care or improvements in organizational outputs 1) or leadership behaviours, styles, attitudes and practices in the health system 2), 3), 4). Sparse data are available on the particularities of health care of leaders.

The aim of this paper however is to present Ramazzini’s observations, from the early seventeenth century, on the health of high ranking people of his time, which is also valid today, not only to leaders, but to all people. These observations are included in a rather unknown work of Ramazzini: L’art de conserver la santé des princes et des personnes du premier rang [The art of maintaining the health of princes and of the persons of high rank] 5), 6), an almost tercentenary book with remarkable concepts of modern preventative public health. The book was originally written in Latin in 1710 under the title: Principum De valetudine commentatione Tienda, dedicated to the Prince of Modena, Duke Francesco II of Modena. It was well received by German scholars, who rapidly published it as a German translation in 1712 in Leipzig and later also as a French translation. It is worth mentioning that in the preface of the book, Bernardino Ramazzini admitted that he edited it at his own expense, in order to bring a service to “my prince, my country and all people in general”, because “physicians prefer books about treating the diseases instead of those that teach you to keep your health” 5), 6).

Bernardino Ramazzini (1633-1714), known as the founder of occupational medicine 7), is considered today also as a pioneer of public health 8). The most famous work of his is De morbis artificum diatriba - Diseases of Workers 9), but he published works on various other subjects, such as epidemiology, pharmacology, or hygiene 10), 11), 12), 13).
His experience in occupational medicine and his work as a court physician determined him to notice the strong link between the state of health of the leaders and that of the nation: “This was the fate of France under Charles IX, who, being always sick, saw his once blooming kingdom overwhelmed by disasters”. He also remarked that in ancient times, kings and emperors had physicians with authority: Alexander the Great had Philippus Arcanus, Caesar Augustus had Antonius Musa, which clearly underlines the role of the doctor in ensuring the leader's health.

This book presents, in a very modern way, the qualities of a physician and the algorithm in which the health status of the social leaders should be monitored (Figure 1).

The well-being of leaders represents a complex responsibility for their private doctors. The first aspect remarked by Ramazzini was the major role of medical training and of the moral qualities of a doctor who has to take care of the health of a leader. Ramazzini describes the special moral qualities of a physician both in his family, as well as during school and university training. Moreover, “a doctor who aims to handle the health of his prince must have completed his studies [...] in some famous university. And before he would commit to practicing medicine, he often had to close himself in the cabinet of some wise and experienced doctors to read both the ancient and modern authors to know which ones he needs to read and which ones he must ignore” 5), 6). Furthermore, after finishing his studies, the physician must follow specialization programs in famous academic centres and gain experience for different treatments. In addition to this training, Ramazzini elaborates the great advantage of being educated in other fields (mathematics, natural physics et al): “These latter sciences do not make him a better doctor, but being more enlightened, the prince would like him better.” 5), 6).

The most interesting part of this book is a concise view on the activity of disease prevention done at the court of the prince: Ramazzini remarked the need of a healthy environment and of analysis of housing and of neighborhood. “Therefore, the first duty of the doctor will be to carefully observe his master's mood and body state.” 5), 6). Ramazzini mentions analysing and determining whether the air in the house and around it is of good quality, and if this environment corresponds to the prince’s personality. To prevent the illness due to epidemics it is necessary to regularly check the building’s state of hygiene, the systematic cleaning of stables and administrative annexes. The doctor, who will work alone or in a team, is the one who will decide the changing of the residence if outbreaks appear.

As the variety of delicacies from the table of a prince is a great temptation to excess, Ramazzini recommends the Hippocratic recipe: “non satiari cibis” (“do not fill yourself”). Meals should be regular, balanced on food principles, according to age and the state of health: “the prince should avoid the quantity and the variety of meats and bear with patience the boring perseverance of his doctor when, during the period in which he enjoys perfect health, the doctor sometimes forbids him from eating certain things.” He does not however categorically condemn the consumption of wine, but clarifies this: “I want that the wine served, instead of making problems, to gently and friendly revive the vital organs, without forcing them or harming them in any way” 5), 6).

In the line of Hippocrates who states “labores cibos praeecedant”, Ramazzini prescribes physical exercises according to the patient’s age: walks in the morning on an empty stomach or in the evening before meal. “There are some exercises that are better suited to great princes ...; they can go hunting, riding, dancing.” 5), 6). Complying with a program of rest represents a duty, because sleep alteration affects the performance of the prince.

Regarding the venereal act, Ramazzini conforms to the notion of Celsius: “the venereal act, he says, should not be too feared, not too desired; too much, it weakens; only the fair proportion wakes up the fluids”. 5), 6).

According to Ramazzini, the doctor has to be very careful regarding the emotional states described as the passions of the soul. The prince should feel joy, pain, sadness and be merciful, sometimes to even become angry, but only to experience anger worthy of a prince: “temperance in anger is what brings the prince the respect and love of their people.” A doctor's duty to take care of an aged prince would consider “as a very useful thing for their health, to often talk with young people [...]. It was observed that elders who felt good around young people have all lived very long.” 5), 6).

As a conclusion, the observations and the principles exposed in this book of Ramazzini reveal the modernity of his thinking not limited to the occupational diseases, but applied also to the education and health promotion. We can say that public happiness depends entirely on the physical and mental health of the leaders.
Keymessage: The algorithm in which the health status of the social leaders should be monitored indicated by Bernardino Ramazzini is still valid for any leader’s health, so that the leaders can fulfil their duty in an impeccable manner. The physician should also ensure that the leader has a healthy life style: good environment, moderation in eating and drinking, a daily exercise schedule, a good personal hygiene, a healthy sleep schedule, and an equilibrated emotional and mental state.

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References