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Editorial

Reflections on relationships between national and world events and development of dermatology. Venezuela as a model

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ABSTRACT

From a personal vantage, the author tries to understand evolution of medicine and dermatology as relating to political, ideological, and economic factors.

He analyzes the evolution of Venezuelan Dermatology research and practice from 1936 to present, relating it to the events that have taken place in that country during this period and integrating the latter to events in the world. There is a close relationship between Venezuelan and US history particularly since the late nineteen-thirties.

Physicians in general and dermatologists in particular should not dismiss or just bear the events that take place in the society as a whole. They should try to influence them by acting in harmony with forces that propitiate freedom, rule of law, free inquiry, and meritocracy.

Keywords: Dermatology, Development, Events, Venezuela

Introduction

Professions and specialties are distinguished from trades and skills, respectively, by the existence of their respective history and the knowledge and analysis thereof.

There is a conjunction of facts and circumstances in history that leads to either evolution and progress, or stagnation and decadence. One may go to a distant past and obtain worthwhile information or analyze events in prominent nations or civilizations. Yet, analysis of relatively recent events in countries that are not among world leaders may provide a clearer vision. The latter would apply to relationships between history, politics, medicine, and dermatology. This is done for the same reasons that justify collection of data from simpler systems to better understand biological principles.

I will show examples of the above that can be gleaned from history of Venezuela with respect to Medicine and Dermatology.

1936-1938. The Mark of the Founder

Gen. Juan Vicente Gómez ruled Venezuela openly or by proxy from 1908 to his death, December 17th 1935. His was an iron-fisted dictatorship. He eliminated quasi-feudal enclaves and integrated the army. He organized national finances and paid foreign debt. By the year 1930 Venezuela had a foreign debt of exactly zero. His administration provided order and internal peace, but not an acceptable rule of law.

Gómez closed universities if they rebelled. He did not understand research, science, or freedom of thought. He did understand the uses of technology and purchased the latter from foreigners who administered its use and would not meddle in internal affairs.

Gómez's death did not bring about a civil war because his successor, Gen. López-Contreras, who controlled the army, allowed many freedoms. He respected terms of office in the Presidency and permitted the return of exiles. There was reform in the

universities and competition for professorships. In 1936, Martin Vegas, a scion of an old and distinguished family who had trained in the Hopital Saint Louis in Paris, created the Venezuelan Society of Dermatology and became its first president. The “Policlínica Caracas”, where Vegas worked was the cradle not only of Dermatology, but of other specialties and a medical journal. Professors were also private practitioners and government physicians. Thus, until now, there was never in Venezuela a town/gown rivalry in Dermatology or in Medicine.

The fateful year of 1936 was also the year during which the Spanish Civil War began and severe tension increased between Germany and France. The world started to see what the Nazi-Fascist iron fist could do and how long could be the arm of the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, shortly after the death of Gómez, Venezuela became a haven for European exiles. Professor Sánchez-Covisa came from Madrid and Paul (Pablo) Guerra from Paris. Guerra was actually born in Venezuela, but had had his medical education, post-graduate training, and academic career in France. He worked under Professor Langeron in mycology and was also an allergist. In addition, he began to work in the Policlínica Caracas. There Guerra established, before his premature death in 1944, the bonds between research and clinical dermatology; he initiated the inclusion of mycology and allergy into the realm of dermatology.

From the Policlínica Caracas came two important pupils of Vegas and Guerra. They became leaders of Venezuelan and Latin American dermatology during the XXth Century. These were Drs. Jacinto Convit and Juan Di Prisco.

1945. The Hegemony of the United States of America

The end of World War II marked the beginning of the predominance of the United States. This became the country to which Venezuelan dermatologists flocked to train. The Mecca was the Skin and Cancer Unit of New York University under the direction of Dr. Marion Sulzberger. Among the trainees that reached prominence afterwards were Francisco Kerdel-Vegas, Francisco Scannone, Luis Velutini, and Eva Köves. These dermatologists brought an emphasis on private practice, early cosmetological techniques including peelings and dermabrasion, radiotherapy, patch testing for allergic contact dermatitis, and strong training in histopathology.. In their private practices they served the well-to-do and the increasing number of immigrants and expatriates that started to come from Europe and the United States. The dermatologists mentioned above had also hospital and university appointments so that they introduced their new techniques and even their technicians and assistants. Young Venezuelan physicians could now get training as residents, although formal establishment of programs had to wait until the next stage.

From late 1945 Venezuela had an experiment in full and aggressive democracy after the overthrow of President Medina-Angarita. The democracy had succeeded López-Contreras after second-degree elections and a fruitful government that was friendly to the United States during the Second World War presided. However, it seemed that the end of his administration would usher a conservative alternative and this was not acceptable for the emerging forces. A new constitution was drafted. Full universal vote was established and for the first time women and illiterate citizens could vote. This time exhibited turbulence and growth of left wing tendencies; there was some menace against the predominance of the armed forces, which in the meantime had become much better trained, partly under American Influence but also by Peruvian military schools; these schools taught military involvement in political matters and a rightist ideology. In 1948, a coup d'état buried the proto-socialist experiment. Still, matters did not return to the status quo ante. Voting rights were unchanged. The prevalence of government controls and governmental enterprises was stimulated. The new rulers, headed by Gen. Marcos Pérez-Jiménez, were not undeducated groups or guerrilla fighters. They were trained as outlined above and favored the establishment of technology and industry in the country. They organized migration in a relatively rational manner. Europeans just out of the war came to Venezuela bringing skills and work ethics. New hospitals and university campuses were built. Oil production sky rocketed and participation of the State in oil profits also climbed. Venezuela became the second world producer and first world exporter of petroleum. There was prosperity, respect for private property, and a favorable disposition toward private activities. Unfortunately, there was also ideological censorship and pitiless persecution of those that thought differently. Political prisons were a sad fact of life.

The Sixties. Research the Magic Word

The late fifties were also eventful. Venezuela's dictator was overthrown January 23rd 1958. The country tried democracy again with the leaders that had been deposed in 1948. Cuba also scuttled its dictator, but tried something very different afterwards.

After some time of turbulence Rómulo Betancourt was elected president of Venezuela. He and other leaders had learned much. Reforms should occur, but legally and gradually. Democratic opponents were adversaries not enemies. The so-called Pact of Punto Fijo established rules. Political parties would recognize results of free elections. Power and offices in the administration would be distributed according to electoral results, but not just for the winning party. This would bring problems in the future, but provided needed stability. Betancourt's government opened itself to the Alliance for Progress and there was a Kennedy visit to

boot. These were years during which, in the United States, research was to be the key to open the door toward progress and happiness under the aegis of democracy and freedom, or so it seemed.

Dermatology was no exception. In the United States, Divisions of Dermatology turned into Departments with laboratories funded by the NIH or private enterprises. Research was indeed the magic word.

Venezuela bought into that ticket and Venezuelan dermatology departments bloomed and played a leadership role. Two gifted leaders, Francisco Kerdel-Vegas and Jacinto Convit joined their efforts to create an unusual nucleus of excellence in Dermatology in the old Vargas Hospital of Caracas, built in 1891. Kerdel was a student of Marion B Sulzberger and a nephew of Martin Vegas. Convit had also briefly trained at NYU and he was a senior career member of the Venezuelan Ministry of Public Health. Dermatological diseases of public health concern included leprosy, venereal diseases, leishmaniasis, deep mycoses, and onchocerciasis.

At the same time, Stanford University Medical School was going through a metamorphosis that changed it from a traditional institution to a world leader. It would integrate first class research with clinical practice. The word was not yet used, but it was translational medicine at its best. Eugene M. Farber participated in this movement from the dermatological vantage point. Sulzberger had moved to San Francisco. Kerdel and Convit were able to lead the Central University School of Medicine into a liaison with Stanford; at the same time they secured funds from the NIH to start creating dermatology research laboratories in Caracas. Professors and young promising researchers were sent from Stanford and to Stanford (the present writer among them). Not only Farber, but Prof. of Microbiology and Immunology, Sidney Raffel, participated in this endeavor. By 1968 laboratories of Immunology, Leprology, Biochemistry, Mycology and Pathology were working in and publishing from Caracas. In a few more years a unique institution was created, then called Instituto Nacional de Dermatología.

The Seventies. The Takeoff that Almost Was

The current young generation would find it difficult to comprehend the euphoria of the Kennedy epoch. It was appropriately called “Camelot”. Dallas and Viet Nam ended this, but the impulse lasted longer in Venezuela. Oil prices climbed as the oil industry was nationalized (and paid for) in 1976. State income went up.

Increased investments were made in science and technology. Under a program called “Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho” (named after Marshal Antonio José de Sucre a Venezuelan independence hero and first president of Bolivia), graduate students were sent abroad for further training. On their return they were expected to start their own research or academic endeavors and many did so. The National Institute of Dermatology (ill-advisedly renamed afterwards) became a model for other Latin American countries (The Dominican Republic and México among them). The Institute became a World Health Organization Reference Center. Its uniqueness was that research laboratories, clinics, teaching, and public health acted together not only spatially but also in joint projects. Many researchers acted as clinicians, teachers and public health doctors.

Around that time Venezuela created a National Research Council (CONICIT). It was funded by the National Budget and later became the Ministry for Science and Technology, but representatives from the private sector and the universities were part of the technical commissions and the executive committee. The president of the council was for many years a university professor. Interestingly, Dermatology had a strong representation originating from the Institute. Dr. José Luis Avila was Vice President of CONICIT and Dr. Goihman-Yahr served as member of the Superior Council for ten years and of the Executive Committee for five. The extreme care that was taken to prevent influence of party politics and of self-serving bureaucracy in the CONICIT worked well for decades. By the end of the seventies Venezuela had some institutions that did world class research and many that were foremost in Latin America. Unfortunately this progress was not successful in permeating the overall university structure and the school systems. The advances came from a bilingual élite that would have needed more time to prevail and to train its successors.

The Eighties, The Sun Set

Bubbles burst. Venezuelan Government and Society overspent. Oil prices went down and timely adjustments were not made, mainly for political reasons. The process took some years, but in February 18th, 1983 (Black Friday), the truth could not be hidden. The bolivar was devalued precipitously for the first time in half a century. Exchange controls were put in place. They were eventually lifted, only to come back with a vengeance. Dermatology continued to function well for some more years, but then effects started to show.

It was not only an economic crisis. The latter eventually resolved. It was also the end of a cycle. The political leaders and ideals that had started in the late thirties and early forties and blossomed in the sixties, withered. The fathers of democracy died or went into dotage. They were followed at best by bureaucrats and at worst by leeches. People undervalued freedom, democracy, and rule of law. Regrettably, the latter also became tainted by corruption (but individually not as a rule). Change was demanded and needed, but instead of modern outlooks and rehabilitative and healing measures, the people turned initially toward one of the remaining aged leaders and afterwards, to a Sorcerer's apprentice who also played Doktor Faustus. The parallels with Hindenburg and Germany in the early thirties are evident. It must be said, that in contrast with Europe in the thirties, Venezuela was neither a country of hatred nor of organized violence. Both had to be created and there was and is great resistance against that.

The End of the XXth Century and Beyond. Apoptosis

The new century brought a controlled chaos, a progressive destruction of institutions. Some were destroyed, others infiltrated. It was the end of whatever meritocracy there was. Yet, neither the country nor Dermatology became frozen or isolated. Venezuela is not North Korea. Research laboratories did not close; they just slowed or actually stopped true production. Projects were presented, but with few results. Papers were read at national meetings and some international ones, but fewer and fewer were sent for publication or accepted. Yet, the internet was widely used, particularly when libraries stopped purchasing subscriptions to journals.

Private practices using lasers, botox, and biopolymers sprouted. Pre-paid medicine pervaded and physicians turned into "providers", at least many of them. A parasitic private health enterprise flourished under the shadow of government as toadstools grow in humid soil under trees. Even that is wilting now with the creation by the government of parallel schools of so-called community medicine. These schools graduate practitioners that have no formal hospital training as of now. Still, this initiative is just starting.

A Final Message (Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. jer. 1:9)

This paper has no true ending. Dermatology and Medicine live and evolve. Venezuelan evolution is not unique, nor is the picture rosy and pristine elsewhere.

I would like to stress that in my lifetime, I have seen the evolution of a primitive country with a population of about three million individuals and a sharply stratified two tiered medical care..

It went into modernity, democracy, and progress; original answers to local problems were found and all signs of being able to take off were promising. Dermatology was at the forefront of progress in science and medicine. Then, as a consequence of political, economic, and resulting social factors the country, now of thirty million people, became seemingly bound to totalitarianism and decay. It happened as it does to an unripe fruit that falls off its tree.

Dermatology reached a high level and has not descended as low as other activities have. Yet, the process is the same. None or very few of the mishaps Dermatology has suffered is related to faults of its own, but to political and economic factors. Doctors cannot isolate themselves from the latter two. We must either participate in and try to influence political directions or will be crushed by them.