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Introduction

Katerina Gardikas

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Special Section / Section Spéciale

RECENT TRENDS IN MODERN GREEK MEDICAL HISTORY

Introduction

This collection of articles was conceived long before the outbreak and worldwide spread of Covid-19. It was intended as a review of recent trends in the writing of modern medical history in Greece thanks to the broader social relevance of public health history. While it still represents current ideas on the history of health and medicine among its Greek practitioners, it appears, nonetheless, at a time when public opinion has put the notions of public health, contagion and governance into sharp relief as societies are being overwhelmed by insecurity and a primal sensation of fear. Thus, public health and social medicine have entered the historiographical limelight.

The constitution of the World Health Organization, which entered into force on 7 April 1948, reflected postwar ideas on human rights as a prerequisite for future world peace in declaring that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition”.¹ Yet, although health thus became a fundamental human right only in the mid-twentieth century, public health nonetheless has a long history that traces the evolution of governance and statehood back at least to the fourteenth century and possibly even beyond. However, public health reached a major turning point in its history when the consolidated state – to use Charles Tilly’s typology² – began to place all important public functions under its sovereign authority. Indeed, from the perspective of state authority, health came to be perceived as a factor of a nation’s wealth in predominantly industrial and agrarian countries alike.

Premodern societies also benefited from public health measures that had been initiated by their several foci of power, for instance drainage works and the appointment of communal doctors under the *condotta* system; even quarantine measures put in place by city authorities. Public health in the modern era,

¹ World Health Organization, *Basic Documents* (World Health Organization, 2020), 1, https://apps.who.int/gb/bd/pdf_files/BD_49th-en.pdf#page=7 (accessed 18 October 2020).

² Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990).

however, entailed measures enacted and supervised by the unified authority of the centralised and autonomous state. In other words, the modern state also defined the public health of modernity, initially with the emergence of the hygienist movement in the eighteenth century and with measures such as state sponsored vaccinations.³

This collection of articles takes the story of public health in modern Greece from the first years of its state-building to the era of health understood as a human right. The first contribution, by Thanasis Barlagiannis, approaches the subject of the contagious diseases that attacked the Greek borders and threatened the health of the Greeks from the point of view of state- and nation-building. He demonstrates how the Greek authorities transformed frontiers into borders that consolidated the political, economic and cultural divide between the new kingdom and the Ottoman Empire by setting up a full sanitary apparatus that included health offices and a string of lazarettos.

The second contribution, by Vassiliki Theodorou and Despina Karakatsani, takes us to the interwar period in the twentieth century. Not only had the Greek borders been consolidated, but the country was among those that were determined to maintain the Treaty of Versailles and face up to revisionist countries in Europe such as neighbouring Bulgaria. As in most contemporary societies, the national discourse included racial and eugenics ideas that had been formulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this context, the country's prominent educators and doctors and the philanthropic societies they set up tried to imbue public health measures and influence the school system with their natalist ideology by propounding the centrality of care for children and their mothers for the fate of the nation.

A less researched aspect of public health history, namely the public treatment of mental health issues, is the subject of the article by Despo Kritsotaki, who focuses on the postwar period. The article highlights the increasing pressure on mental health institutions after World War II and the involvement of public institutions and private sector enterprises, as well as the expanding community of mental health professionals, in dealing with these burgeoning needs by introducing a variety of innovations and alternative mental health policies. These included the involvement of the World Health Organization, improvements in hospital infrastructure, the application of pharmaceutical therapies, a shift away from asylum-type public institutions towards extramural

³ Dorothy Porter, "The History of Public Health: Current Themes and Approaches," *Hygieia Internationalis* 1, no. 1 (1999): 14–15, <https://ep.liu.se/ej/hygien/ra/002/paper.pdf> (accessed 2 August 2020).

care and mental hygiene. These reforms shaped the Greek mental healthcare system.

Finally, the article by Anastas Philalithis on the founding of the Greek National Health Service (ESY) brings the collection to the contemporary era of the *metapolitefsi*, or “regime change”, since 1974. The article combines a study of public and social health with an analysis of power struggles and accommodations among discrete agents, such as political parties, interest groups, like private healthcare providers and groups of medical professionals, and individual politicians. The story develops within governments, in parliament, in the unions and behind the closed doors of influential actors. These confrontations have effectively left the fragmented Greek public health system without an instrument of primary health care. To these tensions the study also adds the effect of the rural-urban divide and of the pressures of the post-2010 austerity measures. The article addresses a dynamic social disequilibrium around a basic human right, a major social policy problem that has yet to be resolved.

It is hoped that this collection will contribute to an understanding of the history of Greek public health, a history which is closely related to the social parameters of Greek state- and nation-building.

Katerina Gardikas

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

