HISTORY AND HUMANITIES IN DERMATOLOGY

[Translated article] Dr Juan de Azúa’s Health Advisory Pamphlets: Health Requires as Much Care as Disease

Los avisos sanitarios del Dr. Juan de Azúa: la salud necesita tanto cuidado como la enfermedad

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A physician’s aim is to preserve health and cure illness, as we have seen during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

In 1880, it was sexually transmitted infections (STIs) that wreaked havoc in communities, and available treatments were ineffective. Mercury was the only recourse, and it was not always well tolerated.

Dr Juan de Azúa y Suárez (Madrid, 1858–1922), a dermatologist and the first full professor of dermatology and syphilology on the medical faculty of the University of Madrid,1 approached his work from the standpoint of public health, or hygiene, in an effort to control STI transmission. He described himself as an "interventionist in this and all questions of health."2

Endowed with an extraordinary gift of observation as well as acumen, Azúa approached the Royal Health Council in 1904 with a proposal to regulate public hygiene with regard to prostitution (Reglamento de la Sección de Higiene de la Prostitución).3 His plan centered around 11 points through which he argued in favor of innovations such as the creation of a health police force and the employment of public health physicians. In an epilog to the proposal, he laid out what he called his "health advisories" (avisos sanitarios) in 2 appendices.

Azúa had previously presented the advisories at an international medical conference in Rome in 1894. They described the prophylactic treatments being used for various skin infections and STIs in patients at Hospital de San Juan de Dios in Madrid.2,4

The importance of Azúa’s approach lay in his effective outreach to the general public to convey information about health and hygiene on a topic toward which attitudes had progressed little and which would have been considered a "moral" issue at the time.

The advisories were meant to be printed. They gave information about syphilis and the blennorrhagias, or mucous discharges, of gonorrhea and other infectious diseases such as leprosy and forms of ringworm. Details referred to the mechanisms of contagion and precautions to take to avoid catching these diseases.

Azúa wrote the material himself and covered the cost of printing it, demonstrating conscientiousness and dedication to the fight against STIs.
This advisory has 2 parts. The first deals with the disease that you have, patient number...., and the second discusses other diseases that are also contagious and that it would be useful for you to read about for other occasions.

Part I: On syphilis
- You have syphilis (one of the diseases commonly called French or venereal diseases).
  You should never forget the following:
  - Syphilis is a lifelong disease (recuring as long as 10, 20, or 50 years after it starts).
  - Makes its appearance in three-ups separated by shorter or longer periods of time.
  - This means that it is a very bad idea for a person with syphilis to stop treatment when signs and symptoms disappear because worse harm can follow.
- To cure syphilis, you must follow your doctor’s instructions for 3 or 4 years or even longer.
- Only 2 medicines are truly effective against syphilis: they are preparations with mercury and preparations with iodides.
- A person becomes infected with syphilis through contact with the open sores, ulcers, chancre, pimpls, scars, and sores, or sores of someone who has the disease. It is also transmitted through blood in the first phase and through saliva if these are open sores or ulcers in the mouth or on the lips or tongue.
- Touching syphilitic sores with your fingers and then inserting the fingers into parts of the body, or scratching the skin with them, is very dangerous.
- If you make contact with a syphilitic lesion, wash your hands immediately. And if you have any sores of broken skin (marches, sores, ulcers) that have touched a syphilitic lesion, the area should be sanitized by a doctor immediately.
- Syphilitic skin can also be caught by touching objects (glasses, shoes, mouth, place, mules, handles of objects, stools, toothbrushes), etc. If they are soaked by pus or moisture from syphilitic lesions.
- When a person has had syphilis for a long time, from 0 to 10 years or more, there is much less danger of contagion.
- The children of people with syphilis will often inherit the infection if they are born during the early years after the parent caught the disease. Women with syphilis often mistreat, give birth prematurely, or have infants who weigh very little. If the mother, the father, or both are treated and cured, they can have healthy children.
- A child with syphilis should be nursed by its mother, or if that is impossible, by another woman who has syphilis, or fed with a bottle, or by a goat.

Figure 1 The first part of Appendix I to Dr Azúa’s public health proposals, in which he gives advice on syphilis. (Translator’s note: The translated instructions are of transcriptions of the versions in Del Río de la Torre’s thesis on the origins of the Madrid school of dermatology.)

The advisors in the 2 appendices are shown in Figs. 1–3. Appendix I, with 2 parts (Figs. 1 and 2), contained texts addressing patients at his hospital’s clinic. The first part covered the prevention of syphilis and the second treated the topic of mucous discharges in gonorrhea and other diseases. Appendix II (Fig. 3) addressed the clients of so-called houses of tolerance or anyone coming into contact with prostitutes.

The advice is written in plain language for the layperson (para el vulgo) and includes examples as well as explicit instructions delivered unceremoniously. The information was intended to be intelligible, practical, and instructive. By way of example, consider the following excerpt:

"These advisories serve

- ‘‘To make clear to readers the harms that contagious (or catching) diseases cause.
- ‘‘To help readers keep from catching contagious diseases most of the time, by means of understanding when and how they are transmitted."

The advisory information had also been presented at the Ninth International Conference of Public Health and Demography (Congreso Internacional de Higiene y Demografía) held in Madrid in 1898. Azúa’s provision of these health advisories represents a historical milestone in Spanish dermatology. By designing informative leaflets focused on preventing STIs, he displayed great insight into and commitment to the health of individuals and the community. To his disappointment, however, they failed to carry weight in society because of the widespread illiteracy of his day. Nonetheless, his efforts were not entirely in vain. In 1910 a royal decree was issued to create a department to regulate hygiene in prostitution (Servicio de Higiene de la Prostitución) under the jurisdiction of the provincial health services. Yet another royal decree 8 years later empowered the Ministry of the Interior (Gobernación) to establish regulations aimed at preventing syphilis and other STIs in Spain. In 1925, municipal health

Figure 2 The advisories in the second part of Appendix I to Dr Azúa’s public health proposals. This section covered the management of mucous discharges (blenorrhagias). (Translator’s note: The translated instructions are of transcriptions of the versions in Del Río de la Torre’s thesis on the origins of the Madrid school of dermatology.)

- To be sure that discharges, syphilis, chancre, venereal sores or sores are not contagious, ask the woman to show you her health card with her picture fixed to it. If the picture is of a different woman or she does not wish to show you her card, the woman will be a bad risk. A sit above the doctor’s most recent signature means that the woman can infect you with something.
- As a precaution, you should give your skin a good wash with water, and if you know how to use corrosive sublimates, do so if you have some with you.
- Pass water, and when you arrive home inject the following solution into the urinary tract with a syringe: (Provide a prescription for a formula that can be used.) Hold the solution inside the urinary tract for 2 minutes.

Figure 3 The advisories in Appendix II to Dr Azúa’s public health proposals. This appendix contained information related to contact with prostitutes working in so-called houses of tolerance. (Translator’s note: The translated instructions are of transcriptions of the versions in Del Río de la Torre’s thesis on the origins of the Madrid school of dermatology. "Corrosive sublimate" is an archaic name for mercuric chloride, HgCl2.)
regulation 63 obliged the creation of outpatient clinics dedicated to these infections. In 1928, the act of infecting others was criminalized in article 538 of the penal code. Among the dermatologists who followed in Azúa’s footsteps, maintaining his approach to public health education and the care of patients with STIs, were Gaspar Bravo de Sobremonte, José Sánchez-Covisa, and Álvarez Sainz de Aja. Sainz de Aja published 4 of his own health advisories in the journal Ecos Españoles de Dermatología y Sifiliografía in 1929. They addressed the needs of patients with syphilis, mucous discharges, venereal chancers, and scabies.

Over time, the old advisory pamphlets would be replaced by new means of communication, such as conferences, posters, and films. However, progress has not erased the evident value of these early efforts to raise public awareness.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

References