

Giuseppe Pasta (1742–1823) and Courage in Medicine

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Abstract. This paper examines an often-forgotten medical essay written by the Italian physician Giuseppe Pasta (1742–1823) in 1792 that first underlined the importance of the psychic and emotional components in a doctor-patient relationship. This paper analyzes the contents of the essay “Del coraggio nelle malattie” (“On Courage in Disease”) by Pasta, highlighting the innovative aspects of the work and contextualizing them to the historical period in which the text was written. In his essay, Pasta states that he is unable to explain the effects of the soul (or spirit) on the human body. He considers courage to be the most noble, powerful and imperative emotion in people who are sick. In his opinion, doctors should instil courage in their patients, thereby counteracting negative feelings that could reduce courage. If patients in a desperate state of health have enough confidence in their doctor, it can also increase their courage. Some illnesses can only be cured with words; therefore, a good doctor should spend as much time with their patients as is necessary to create in them – through verbal and non-verbal means – positive reactions and courage in dealing with their state. In conclusion, the work of Giuseppe Pasta may be one of the first texts that has analyzed the psychic and emotional components in the doctor-patient relationship.

Key words: history, Giuseppe Pasta, eighteenth century, moral medicine, doctor-patient relationship

Introduction

The importance of emotional components in the doctor-patient relationship is a universally accepted concept (1). Today, empowering positive emotional strength is considered to be an important tool in any healthcare strategy, and the so-called “placebo effect” has lost its negative meaning, instead being recognized as useful in some treatments (2). Such concepts should be part of the education of all healthcare students, who must be fully aware of the therapeutic importance of an empathic doctor-patient relationship and the influence of the psyche on the body (3).

Empowering courage in patients is one strategy that has been proposed in the past few decades (4–6). For example, in her dissertation on “The role of *courage* in the experience of patients with diabetes complications”, Patricia Donahue-Porter states that “courage has been viewed as a virtue, a gift, a potential to be

developed [. . .] the study of courage and its development [. . .] may better help the patient to face life and death” (7).

Although their relevance in medical practice would not be disputed today, such ideas were not theorized until the eighteenth century. Johann Ulrich Bilguer (1720–1796) states that every physician should also be a physician to the soul. In his opinion, some conditions are diseases of the body as well as of the soul, according to a holistic approach to medicine that dates back to Hippocrates (8). The eighteenth century saw the emergence of several medical treatises on the passions; for example, those of Alberti (1735), Junker (1733), Clark (1758), Zuckert (1764), Lemort Deméigny (1784) and Scheidemantel (1787) (8). In “A Dissertation on the Influence of the Passions upon Disorders of the Body” (1788), the English physician William Falconer (1744–1824) lists the diseases produced by passions such as rage (e.g., apoplexy,

fever) and pain (e.g., hysteria, consumption) (9). He also states that some passions can help cure diseases; for example, anger can cure gout, while love can heal heart disease and paresis. Fear can weaken the body, causing diarrhoea, while confidence may heal intermittent fevers or prevent plague (9). The eighteenth-century treatises became the basis of the concept of “psychosomatic medicine”, which was developed in the following century after Johann Christian Augustus Heinroth (1774–1843), a psychiatrist in Leipzig, coined the term to explain the connection between the psyche and soma in human diseases (9).

In this context, Giuseppe Pasta (1742–1823) was one of the first authors who attempted to methodize the empowerment of courage in patients in a period when the *armamentarium* of physicians was still poor and few therapeutic regimens could be considered efficacious. Giuseppe was born in Bergamo on 9 April 1742 to a highly respected family; his cousin was the renowned physician Andrea Pasta (1706–1782), author of a pioneering essay on menstruation and an illustrious pupil of Giovanni Battista Morgagni (1682–1771) (11). After studying medicine at the University of Padua, Giuseppe returned to Bergamo, where he began his medical career, initially serving as a proto-physician for the province and later as director of St Mark’s Great Hospital (12). The erudition of Giuseppe Pasta may be confirmed by his membership to the Academy of the Eccitati, an association of men of letters in Bergamo, and by the cultural environment of his city, where Pasta would often meet scientists and scholars from multiple disciplines (12). Pasta showed a deep interest in the doctor-patient relationship, and in 1791, he wrote a short volume on the etiquette of the physician (“Galateo dei medici”) (13). In this book, Pasta mainly focuses on the physician’s position of power and their manner in approaching their patient, underlining the importance of the physician showing pleasantness, sympathy, cordiality and interest toward patients (13). This text, also translated into French, was a great success even outside of Italy and was the forerunner of another essay published the following year, which was entirely dedicated to “courage” in diseases and to the physician’s role of stimulating this feeling in patients.

“On Courage in Disease” (1792)

In 1792, just one year before retiring from his appointment as director of St Mark’s Great Hospital in Bergamo, Giuseppe Pasta published, with the elegant font of the prestigious typographer Giovanni Battista Bodoni (1740–1813) in Parma, an essay entitled “Del coraggio nelle malattie” (“On Courage in Disease”) (14). The text is a neatly printed book of XVI+106 pages, presumably accepted for printing by Bodoni’s publishing house due to the reputation of its author.

In the introduction of the text, Pasta states that pharmacological cures are already numerous; thus, physicians should conduct more accurate studies on remedies derived from a “moral” approach (14). He wanted to prove the essence and the means through which the power of the soul acts on the living body. Pasta states that the effects of the soul on the body are a mystery that can only be based on unproven hypotheses unless one can explain how a “simple substance” (the spirit) can act on a “composite substance” (the body), according to the dualism of the Cartesian philosophy (14).

Pasta considers courage to be the most noble and powerful of the feelings and the most imperative for sick people. Hope, trust, condescension and similar affections derive their strength from courage, which interacts with the body with multiple effects. Although illness may weaken the soul and lessen courage, medical art – which is addressed to repair physical damage – should also employ all means of improving the vigour of the spirit to improve the wellness of the body (14).

To instil courage, the physician must be aware of the feelings that could reduce it. Pasta lists the following feelings as capable of reducing courage: temperament, fear, sadness, devotion, shyness and aversion.

Temperamento (temperament), influenced by education, is a strong determinant of courage and particularly manifests during disease. Doctors should recognize the true temperament of their patients while they are at their bedside. A weak temperament in patients may reduce their courage and consequently the efficacy of therapies; as such, doctors should implement strategies aimed at helping patients to better cope with disease (14).

Paura (fear) is one of the most relevant causes of the loss of courage, and it could be fatal. Symptoms of fear are pallor, accelerated heartbeat, tremors, fainting and the absence of bleeding and natural secretions such as menstruation, breast milk and sweat. The latter can also increase, but it is generally cold. Digestive problems such as loss of appetite, indigestion, diarrhoea and flatulence are also induced by fear, as well as bowel obstructions and gangrene. If fear can cause so many somatic alterations in healthy subjects, it is even more capable of worsening the illness of sick people who are scared of their disease. Citing “Domestic Medicine” by William Buchan (1729-1805) (15), Pasta observes how excessive fear and the fright of losing one’s life often bring about fatal outcomes and cannot be overcome even by the most intrepid courage. Hypochondriac fear of getting sick may provoke the disease itself and reduce one’s will to react against disorders (14). After having examined the harmful consequences of fear in pregnant women, Pasta describes the importance of a comfortable external environment. For example, the sound of the death knell, the view of corpses into the hospital and funeral participation could disturb the sick, as these may enhance fear and lessen the ability to cope with the disease.

Tristezza (sadness) is another feeling capable of lessening courage. It may be a real sadness derived from pain or an imaginary sadness caused by a false perception of gravity (16). Whatever its origin, sadness is one of the more harmful passions, and it should be overcome in all ways. Courage should be increased through the reasoning of doctors to remove the negative mood and instil beneficial courage in the patient (14).

Pietà (devotion) affects some people who interpret religion erroneously and escape from joyfulness, heroism, good heartedness and courage due to a misguided acceptance of the divine will. It makes them unreceptive to any efforts to cope and fight against their disease with courage and strength (14).

Verecondia (shyness) and feelings of social shame for one’s illness can make it difficult for doctors to cure patients unless negative thoughts can be removed and courage instilled (14).

Antipatie (aversion) can also reduce courage. Patients who dislike physicians, drugs and medicine itself could damage themselves by refusing to accept their

illness. Their aversion may be even more harmful if it is against the drugs that are crucial for healing their disease. Reluctance, which is often sustained by prejudice, must be defeated through courage to avoid the worsening of the disease (14).

Courage, according to Pasta, is an essential tool. Humans are pure machines (*res extensa*) if they are not provided for by the animating flame of courage (*res cogitans*). The defeat of disease requires complex actions by the whole somatic system, which will always be imperfect if it does not receive a favourable influence from the positive emotion of courage. Unfortunately, most people lack this courage, as they are accustomed to putting too much trust in mechanistic medicine and external healing aids and are therefore unwilling to participate in the healing process (14).

However, contrary to the aforementioned feelings that reduce courage, there are some virtues capable of reinforcing it: prudence, hope and resistance.

Prudenza (prudence) is one of the main driving forces of courage. Human actions, driven by wisdom, reason and habit, seek to obtain pleasure and avoid painful states. A prudent man will never despair and will always be convinced to escape from a disease or illness (14).

Speranza (hope) and the desire to heal are intimately interconnected and generate courage. Hope should thus never be taken away, as it can produce unexpected clinical results, particularly in individual cases. Pasta sustains that doctors should not tell incurable patient the whole truth about the irreversible nature of their disease, as it could worsen the already painful state of the patient. On the contrary, doctors should always increase hope in their patients during consultation (14). Pasta also observes how there is no doctor wholly unable to submit patients to his will. Medical power over patients should always be consciously used to support them. Furthermore, patients’ confidence in their doctors is sufficient to give them courage in a desperate state of health.

Resistenza (resistance) is the firm determination to resist all illness, especially pains and discomforts. Pasta believes that human beings gain strength through their own will (14).

It is thus important that doctors stimulate these virtues (prudence, hope and resistance) to support

patients during the course of their disease. As such, a good doctor should spend as much time with their patients as is necessary to induce in them, through verbal and non-verbal means, positive reactions and courage in dealing with their state.

Among exterior objects that could infuse courage in patients, Pasta emphasizes the importance of music. In detail, he believes that military music, in addition to being able to excite soldiers to face death, can push patients to cope with their illness (14). Wine and other spirits and opium can also help patients to better deal with their derangements.

However, what is better than having a good friend to share the difficult journey with? Pasta cites the following Latin aphorism: *Auxilium a notis petito, si forte laboras. Sed quisquam melior Medicus, quam fidus Amicus?* (“Desire the help of your acquaintance if perhaps you are in trouble. There is not any better physician than a faithful friend”). Doctors should thus be able to interact with their patients in a friendly manner to reinforce their confidence, hope and courage (14).

In the final part of his essay, after having illustrated the factors that may reduce or improve courage, Pasta eventually describes how to cope with some particularly difficult situations, such as dealing with people affected by hypochondria, hysteria, scurvy, tuberculosis, gout, jaundice and other chronic diseases. Single chapters are dedicated to pregnant and birthing women and to patients who have undergone surgery. For all of them, courage is the main feeling that doctors are encouraged to cultivate (14).

Discussion

The work of Giuseppe Pasta on courage in medicine is part of eighteenth-century medical literature that emphasizes the role of passions as causes of disease, a prelude to modern psychosomatic medicine. In his text, Pasta cites some coeval doctors and their works, such as William Falconer and William Buchan, showing significant knowledge of international texts on this issue. However, Pasta differs from these other authors because he focuses on the passions that can be generated within the doctor-patient relationship. Courage is generally presented as a virtue for doctors,

in addition to competence and compassion; however, according to Pasta, it could also be considered a virtue for patients. Virtues are not entirely innate and must be acquired, at least in part, through teaching and practice. Therefore, while Pasta examines how to increase courage in patients, he briefly reviews other positive and negative passions, vices and virtues in the doctor-patient relationship: temperament, fear, hope, sadness, shyness, dislike, prudence, hope and resistance.

The importance of the temperament of the patient could be considered reflective of the Hippocratic humoralism. In Greco-Roman medicine, sanguine choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic temperaments were related to the four humours (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm). Pasta proves that he does not believe in a fixed relationship between internal secretions and human personality. His concept of temperament is more similar to the modern concept of “premorbid personality” (i.e., the personality traits that existed before the development of a disease or disorder). The patient’s premorbid personality is an important variable that influences their response to disease.

Pasta’s thoughts and theories appear to be pioneering in various respects. In his analysis of fear, Pasta reports a modern and accurate description of neurovegetative symptoms related to this feeling. Similarly, his attention to the recognition and treatment of “sadness” (depression) and “devotion” (resignation) in patients confirm the modernity of his approach. He underlines the importance of communication, compassion and trust in a doctor’s relationship with shy patients. However, he also emphasizes firmness toward people who refuse drugs and medicine itself, a problem that is still present in the contemporary era. Finally, the concept of *Resistenza*, which contributes to the improvement of courage in patients, does not seem so far from the modern idea of resilience.

The induction of positive thoughts and the maintenance of a hopeful attitude in doctors could be interpreted as a support for medical paternalism. Pasta sustains that benevolently lying to patients could be a good act; as such, it could appear in contrast with modern ethics of truth-telling and the recent concept of honesty in medicine. Today, prognostic uncertainty and ambiguous and vague medical reporting are often used to protect doctors more than to benefit patients.

Pasta seems to be less modern from this point of view but redeems himself by reflecting on power imbalance in doctor-patient relationships. He believes that doctors must use their power over patients correctly and must avoid submitting patients to their will.

Pasta also sustains the importance of non-verbal communication and the therapeutic effects of music. The curative aspects of music and the importance of a cautious use of narcotics are both observed by Pasta, who, toward the end of his life, published a poem entitled “Anatomy and Medical Music” (1821), in which the curative properties of music are illustrated (17). His intuition is now fully developed in the modern practice of “music therapy”.

Finally, Pasta praises friendship in the doctor-patient relationship. Friendship is something that patients may need from physicians and is considered a positive professional attribute. However, the risk inherent in dual relationships is that objectivity can become blurred by emotions or extraneous concerns.

Conclusion

Due to the overwhelming technical improvements of modern medicine, it is easy to consider the therapeutic *armamentarium* of eighteenth-century doctors to be merely a historical curiosity, lacking in any practical interest today. However, although more than 200 years have elapsed since the publication of “On Courage in Disease”, Giuseppe Pasta’s observations are still of absolute actuality, as they pertain to human characteristics that, at variance with the enormous technical advances, have not changed over time and should never be forgotten in activities in which inter-human relationships are of paramount importance.

The patient-physician relationship is one area in which the elements necessary for courage are present: freedom of choice, fear, risks, worthy goals and uncertainty. The efficacy of the mutual participation model of equal partnership and the achievement of a real therapeutic alliance require knowledge of the main driving forces of a good doctor-patient relationship (18). As Pasta noted in 1792, trust, loyalty, mutual knowledge and respect are the pillars of a process that might improve health outcomes. Generalized trust in

the healthcare system and personal trust in the medical profession, mutual knowledge, friendliness, warmth, emotional support, well-conducted and careful consultations, continuity of care and congenial surroundings that create a positive atmosphere all contribute to an increase in the will of patients to fight against their disease or – as Pasta would state – to strengthen their courage to cope with it.

Study programs for medical students should include the teaching of factors that influence the doctor-patient relationship and the skills needed to improve hope and courage for a better outcome. For his pioneering and observations, Giuseppe Pasta and his works deserve a special place in the history of medicine.

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