

The establishment of institutes for the blind in Italy

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Abstract. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the newly-unified Italian nation found itself having to face a variety of serious problems in all sectors of human activities. Among the many social and health issues was that of blindness, both in cities and in the countryside. Not only were there large numbers who lost their sight but above all they were without any form of assistance. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that in most cases the afflicted were children (1). The diseases that led to blindness were mainly of an infectious nature, which could already arise during pregnancy but were especially prevalent at the time of childbirth. Moreover, trachoma was at the time in an endemic state across almost the whole country. Thus in this period in Italy - but also throughout Europe - Institutes for the Blind were established, aimed towards assembling abandoned and helpless blind people (2), providing them with accommodation and, as the ultimate goal, ensuring adequate education and instruction in order to give them full autonomy. Thus, typhology began to develop in scientific relevance and became defined as a science for the study of the problems and conditions of the blind in order to ensure their autonomy and their complete social and cultural integration.

Key words: Blindness, typhology, ophthalmology

At the beginning of the twentieth century, blindness was perceived as a major social problem in many European nations (3). Not only was the prevalence and incidence of visually impaired people very high, but the most worrying aspect was that the most affected sections of the population were children and young adults.

In an era which witnessed the Cultural Revolution of the Enlightenment, the great political events that began with the French Revolution (4), the chain of bloody wars that followed, the initial and progressive process of industrialization and the chaotic increase in the urban population, the ensuing social upheavals were so serious that they could barely be managed. In terms of public health too, previous chronic concerns (5) now accelerated dramatically due to both promiscuity and poverty among large sections of the population. The problem of assistance became increasingly urgent, especially for the growing numbers of blind people.

The causes of visual impairment were nearly always the same, above all infectious eye diseases (6).

In some situations, these were often endemic, but at other times they manifested themselves in an epidemic form, which became more widespread and passed on by the displacement of troops. Then there were cases of eye trauma from severe contusion but above all puncturing wounds, the result of war, work or simply accidents, at a time when any standard of protection and hygiene was neglected (7). Finally, there were the numerous eye diseases that had always been known throughout history.

The nineteenth century was one of great discoveries in the field of medicine. It witnessed “*such an important turning point in the history of medicine that at the end of the nineteenth century the ideas about diseases, treatment methods and hygiene practices bore only a slight resemblance to those of the turn of the century.*” (8).

The most important innovations took place after 1850. It should not be assumed, however, that the first half of the century saw stagnation in all sectors of medicine. This was certainly not the case with regard to health services where, on the contrary, great

progress was made. A large number of hospitals were built, greater collaboration developed between doctors and above all public health services (9) were strengthened and better organized to avert numerous epidemics. Dealing with the dramatic problem of blindness could no longer be postponed, as a dual approach emerged in an attempt to tackle (10) this issue: on the one hand, providing residential assistance to the blind, with particular regard to the youngest and those who could not rely on a family or social context that guaranteed their survival (11), and on the other hand favoring their rehabilitation as much as possible by enhancing their sensory abilities (12). This was not only designed to reclaim their individual identity but also for their social integration, so as not to be a burden for the community but rather constitute an active and productive part of it.

As regards the first aspect of this approach, the French model of the *Institute des Jeunes Aveugles* (13) in Paris already existed, with a secular form of management. This had established itself over centuries by developing a highly efficient organization and perfecting a system of community life over the years. With regard to the second objective, these aims were extremely ambitious and not at all easy to achieve, yet some measures were already being enacted. In fact, at the aforementioned French institute, a revolutionary educational path had been set out by Valentin Haüy (14) and was described in an essay written in 1786. It proposed the education of young blind people through various experience-based means, where the main purpose of enabling them to read replaced sight with touch. To this end, it was necessary to print books with raised characters in such a way that the blind could have access to the world of culture by learning the notions of language, history, geography, mathematics and music, essential elements in any search for employment.

“Essai sur education de aveugles, ou exposé des différents moyens, vérifiés par lesquels ils pouissent take des connaissances de langues, d’histoire, de géographie, de musique, d’exécuter différents travaux relatifs aux métiers ...” (15).

Incredibly, this ingenious program, which was highly ambitious for its time, became feasible after only a few decades thanks to Louis Braille (16) and his tactile reading and writing method that today bears his

name and is now universally adopted. Thus, a new era was finally opening up for the blind.

Spurred on by what was happening in France but also in other European nations, Italy too began to witness the establishment of Institutes for the Blind (17). In most cases the initiative for this was taken by men from the wealthiest classes of society who grew up with the Enlightenment principles that had inspired both the French and Risorgimento revolutions. They formed part of a class of notables (*honoration restand*), which can be defined as a very limited segment of the population (18) which occupied all the posts of society at the time. This class was made up of those who possessed specific and strong social considerations and who, thanks to their economic wealth and degree of cultural leverage, were able to direct or administer an institution. For these types of activities, they did not usually receive any economic remuneration and only performed the role on an honorary or nominal basis, as if it were a secondary profession.

During a conference in the presence of the Queen Mother held at the Roman College on February 8, 1906, Professor Alfonso Neuschuler provided a general overview of the establishment of Institutes for the Blind in Italy (19). He stated that;

“It was around 1815 that the movement initiated by Haüy and Klein saw repercussions in Italy, more specifically in the kingdom of Naples, where under King Ferdinand I the first Institute for the Blind in Italy was built in 1818 and given the name “S. Giuseppe and S. Lucia”. Encouraged by this happy and noble experiment, other good and beneficial souls attempted similar actions, and in 1838 Abbot Configliacchi founded a central Institute for the Blind in Padua. Shortly after this, in 1840, Michele Barozzi, an exquisite soul who devoted himself entirely to the purest type of philanthropy, founded another institute in Milan that can now host 191 unfortunate people, and is under the direction of Father Vitali” (20).

These first philanthropic attempts were followed by a period of inactivity and it was not until 1868 that new institutes began open for the blind. These included the *“Davide Chiossonè”* institute (21) (named after its founder), capable of hosting 100 beneficiaries from the Genoa area. The S. Alessio institute in Rome then started to provide its services to the blind people of Italy’s future capital. 1869 saw a new institute in Naples,

1870 two new institutes in Florence and Pavia (22), 1871 an institute in Assisi and 1873 new institutes in Milan, Naples and Rome, the latter in particular at the request of the kind-hearted future Queen of Italy, Margherita of Savoy, from whose name the institute was named. From 1875 to 1885 six new hospices opened in Como, Bologna, Milan, Turin and Reggio Emilia. In 1892 an institute was opened in Palermo, followed by Padua in 1895, another in Pavia in 1896 and two in Turin and Cagliari in 1897 (23).

However, in 1883 the journal *The Mentor of the Blind*, a monthly periodical published in Florence, reported a statistic from the first National Congress for the Education of the Blind in Florence in the same year. This revealed that although the number of blind in Italy was approximately 26,000, only a few hundred were registered by Institutes for the Blind (*The Mentor of the Blind*, VI, n.10, 1883). By the end of the 19th century there were 23 Institutes for the blind operating in Italy (20) which could only assist and rehabilitate 496 blind people out of a total of approximately 40,000 (Neuschuler), a figure of around 2.3% (24).

As regards the cost of assistance provided, only a limited number of admissions were accepted without charge. Mostly these were in a semi-free form, or were financially supported by the local council or province, often in the form of religious charity (25). In some cases they were entirely at the expense of the family or individual benefactors.

In addition to the 23 institutes in Italy, there were also two charity associations for the blind, both based in Florence: *Tommaseo* dealt with local cases, while *Margherita* was a national concern with branches in Rome, Naples, Turin, Padua and Milan. These associations oversaw two principal tasks; assembling abandoned blind people who were otherwise without assistance, education or instruction, providing them with accommodation in institutions and the placement of the blind upon their discharge from institutions. Both these tasks were difficult to accomplish. Finding employment which guaranteed full autonomy was a result that few blind people could hope to achieve, even “with the help of fortune tellers”, which unfortunately, few could hope for. Even residency at an institute was not always guaranteed, especially for those with no possessions or means of support. In the case of

Aurelia Crupi, a young girl “*who became blind due to the fright caused in the latest earthquake in Calabria*”, it was necessary to launch a subscription in order to have her hospitalized at the Sant’Alessio institute in Rome and thus afford the costs of admission and supplies (25).

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