

## **THE SKRLJEVO DISEASE - ENDEMIC SYPHILIS - IN THE SLOVENE LANDS**

Deskriptorji:

Skrljevo disease, history of medicine, epidemic disease, endemic disease, preventive medicine, public health, Slovenia, Andreas Mosetich

The Skrljevo disease is an endemic syphilis, which first appeared in the Croatian coastal region around the year 1790 and greatly affected the territory of Rijeka and Quarnero on the coast, and the villages of the hinterland and the rural population living there. The disease spread south to Dubrovnik and towards the north to Trieste and to nowadays Slovenia. The vectors for the *Treponema pallidum* were most probably soldiers and merchants coming from Turkey. They also brought it to Croatia and Bosnia, while it probably spread to the former Carniola along merchant routes.

The Archives of Slovenia hold the original, still unpublished collection of documents regarding the Skrljevo disease in the Slovene lands for the period 1810–1850. The data obtained from the primary sources assist us in reconstructing the events that were happening in these parts; in addition, all the data gained from the remaining literature frequently, by analogy, indicate the path towards correct conclusions.

The Skrljevo disease mostly affected the rural areas inhabited by modest living peasants, where the people's income, the degree of illiteracy and the death rate of newborn babies were most unfavourable factors.

Children and young adults fell sick most frequently. Due to its contagiousness, the infection spread easily to other members of the family; therefore, one may speak of a family type of disease. Transmission of the disease is mainly asexual and extra-genital; it is conditioned by poor economic, social and hygienic circumstances and by a low standard of living.

The clinical picture does not differ from the sporadic syphilis, although for a long time it was thought that there was no primary affect, and that there were no late changes to the cardiovascular and central nervous system. Among the doctors of the time, two opinions were formed regarding the new disease: the dualists claimed that the disease was a mixture of syphilis with leprosy, scabies, tuberculosis and suchlike; the unitarists, however, saw its resemblance to, and finally identified it with syphilis.

After approximately half a century of divergence of opinions, both parties came to the agreement that the Skrljevo disease was an extra-genital type of syphilis.

Fortunately, the differing etiological views did not have any influence on the treatment; since all were in

agreement that the anti-syphilitic therapy was the most efficient from the very beginning. The theory on a disease *sui generis* was also represented by several of the most prominent doctors of that period: J. P. Frank, the originator of social medicine, J. B. Cambieri, protomedic and chief doctor at the Skrljevo Hospital of Rijeka (Fiume), and A. Jevnikar, the doctor from Ljubljana who, by taking over the position of protomedic in Trieste, energetically tackled the problem and its solution among the Slovenes.

We do not have at our disposal precise data on the number of sick persons in Carniola; however, a good insight into the size and extent of the epidemic can be gained from the archive records for the period 1817–1822. The Viennese doctor, Andrej Baron Stiff was the first to prepare the programme for treatment of the Skrljevo disease, which included: obligatory examination of the complete population on the infected territory, hospital treatment of all the sick and suspected cases, and thorough cleansing of homes of the sick. The programme is an excellent example of preventive treatment at the beginning of the 19th century. By means of such a radical approach, they succeeded in breaking the circle of infectious disease, and by systematic work over slightly less than half a century managed to clip the wings of the Skrljevo disease. In the summer of 1818, a specialized hospital was locally opened (in Postojna). For treatment of sick they used all kinds of medicine, including mercurial preparations. They confronted the problem of mercurialism, although they did not manage to avoid it. During the 10-year period of functioning of the Skrljevo Hospital in Postojna, systematic visits to the infected areas

were organized, and the disease gradually started to lose its sharpness and also, the people were losing their fear of it. Therefore, in 1828 the hospital in Postojna was closed down, and the remaining patients were treated at civil hospitals, mainly in Ljubljana. Through the efficient measures and the improvement of living conditions the Skrljevo disease was eradicated among the Slovenes.