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Down and out in Italy

Among the vacation packages available to tourists there is one that includes a six weeks' stay at a public hospital in Italy. A prerequisite for joining is severe jaundice from hepatitis A combined with the supreme confidence and unbounded insouciance of youth. This tour I took in 1959, soon after my internship. By the time I reached Milan I was ready for an educational experience at the other end of the needle in a large noisy medical ward. Here patients were being admitted at all hours and old men shuffled about all night with their parrot shaped "papagallo" urinals. In the next bed a man still confined to bed several weeks after a myocardial infarction was attached to a huge oxygen tank, according to the custom of the times.

After a few days I was moved to a smaller room, probably because I was deemed to be infectious, not out of deference for my being a doctor. This room I shared with a young man from Calabria, Calogero, who had tuberculosis meningitis, and whose pills the suora, or sister, would occasionally mix up with mine. Calogero and I became friends and he began to teach me Italian. However, the lessons came to an abrupt end as he developed a spinal block, so that one night he jumped on the bed in his toga-like white nightgown shouting that he understood everything and was now the head of the government. He had to be restrained, had a cisternal tap done in our room, and then was moved to a neurosurgical unit.

Every morning all patients were supposed to receive intravenous injections of vitamins and calcium gluconate, both of which I refused. I did, however, take the oxytetracycline, which induced mucous diarrhea, and I also underwent repeated galactose tolerance tests as well as relaxation of the sphincter of Oddi by duodenal intubation after an "antispasmodico" injection. The diet was "hepatica vegetale" - mainly broth, pasta, and boiled chicken, but, according to the little nurse from Brescia, no more than one slice of bread. There was also chamomile tea - a horrible brew, not recommended.

The morning would start at 5 am with an attendant noisily jerking up the blinds. Then the nurse from Brescia would scatter sawdust on the floor and sweep it up with a huge broom. By 7 am the nuns would chant their Ave Marias. By then we were quite hungry but usually had to wait until 10 am for the resident to draw more blood for tests. Incidentally he was on duty in the hospital all the time, Thursday nights excepted.

Several times a week a team of doctors made rounds. The professor marched in front, followed by his assistants and volunteer students. One of the students initially took an exceedingly long history, but hurt my feelings by subsequently totally ignoring me. Later a new professor arrived and prescribed some new antiviral tablets. I pretended to take them but threw them down the sink.

Christmas was a lonely affair, but as the jaundice subsided they move me briefly back to the big ward. The man with the myocardial infarct was now being cautiously mobilized. On New Year's Day rich ladies in fur coats came to distribute oranges, saying "Auguri." Then, as the snow was drifting down from the Alps, I was discharged. On the whole I had been treated most graciously. To show my gratitude I went back a week later and took chocolates. At this time the resident gave me new instructions. He said nothing about staying off alcohol but advised me that I should avoid fatty foods and women - niente donne.