THE BEGINNINGS OF ROMANIAN DENTAL MEDICAL EDUCATION.
TWO FOUNDERS: GHEORGHE BILASCU AND D. D. NICULESCU

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Abstract

In Western European, starting with 1870, the stomatologist was an independent worker, refusing the all-embracing patronage of surgery, while the dentistry profession used to acquire prestige and autonomy in the medical world. As the object of some modern, legal regulations, being also taught in universities as an independent discipline, dentistry was no longer viewed as a “Cinderella” of the medical science. Against the background of such a definite professional emancipation, the necessity to establish institutions forming doctors specialized in Dentistry became an impending one. The formal separation from “the older sister” – Medicine – and the creation of dental schools and departments was the more difficult, the more deeply rooted were the conservative mentalities and old traditions. Yet, the master minds of dentistry succeeded in imposing their ideas, supported by sound and convincing arguments, for the creation of the first schools of dental medicine in Romania. Consequently, as early as 1872, in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, an imperial decree recognized the importance of dental practice and of its belonging to a separate branch of medicine, its exercising being permitted only to doctors in medicine. In such a politico-legislative context, the first faculty of stomatology was created at Cluj, in 1919, under the guidance of Gheorghe Bilăscu. In the same period, in Bucureşti, another daring character, great supporter of the stomatological school, dr. D. D. Niculescu, was taking great efforts to convince the decision-makers on the necessity of creating a faculty of stomatology, yet with no positive outcome. Several years were still to pass until the foundation of the first academic institution of dentistry in Romania (1936). The friendship uniting these two dreamers in the beginning of the XXth century is a perfect exemplification of the intense communication and cooperation within intellectual elites for the development of a medical stomatology school in the two Romanian provinces.

Keywords: stomatological school, Gh Bilăscu, D D Niculescu.

Towards the end of the XIXth century and beginning of the XXth one, the South Carpathians region witnesses a flourishing period for medical education, marked by numerous legislative reforms aimed at putting it in line with the Western standards. In this respect, immediately after the Union of 1859, establishment of the first Faculty of Medicine in Bucureşti and development of the classical medical disciplines advance, while the need for a school of stomatology is also manifested. The paces made were small and highly wavering, as the situation of those practising this profession and their status were not lawfully established. The sanitary law of 1893 stipulated, on one side, that dentists should be compulsorily doctors in medicine, while, in the absence of a specialized department, the market was monopolized by unprofessional artisans and even impostors. An army of possessors of non-academic diplomas, produced by obscure Pari- sian or Nord American institutions, claimed to be highly-trained and competent specialists or, in the rarest cases in which the dental office was served by a doctor in medicine, he was, almost always, a perfect stranger in the field, possibly specialized in venereal diseases, an occultist or orthopedist. Usually, in such situations, the whole work was performed by a dental technician, or doctors simply used to sell their name to persons of dubious character. In such a situation, the fear of an endemic frequency of malpraxis is so great, that the Royal House of Romania addresses only reputed specialists from outside the country, such as doctor Young, while nobility treats all dental problems only abroad. The common people could only address the classical druggist, so truthfully described by Caragiale in his play ”D’ale carnavalului”.

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In the year 1903, after endless battles, the Faculty of Medicine of București organizes – hardly supported by its Dean, doctor Mărdărescu – a “free (optional) course of mouth and tooth diseases” delivered by a young and promising specialist, trained in France, dr. D.D. Niculescu. The course registers an unexpected and rapid success, demonstrating once again that Romanian dentistry needs immediate legal identity, an independent department appearing as absolutely necessary. As early as his opening lecture, the doctor outlines the following aspects: “Important days in the life of a physician are rare, indeed, that is why I do not know whether I’ll have another like the present one. Launching of the course on mouth and tooth diseases in this Faculty, as an absolute novelty, even if labelled as optional, appears to me a sacred duty ...” [1].

![D. D. Niculescu](image)

Nevertheless, contrary to all expectations, involved here being obscure motivations of political order, after only 3 years, the new Dean, dr. Toma Ionescu, brother of the great conservative politician Take Ionescu, suspends this course, promising its subsequent resuming in an institutionalized millieu. Unfortunately for Romanian stomatology, this interruption lasted not less than 30 years, the Byzantine ambitions and the all-embracing lack of interest for public well-being prevailing once again. Defeated by this short-sighted patriarch of the medical school along the banks of Dâmbovița, D.D. Niculescu remains a stranger in the history of dental medicine, even if he should be recognized as a pioneer in his discipline.

His scientific career, that of a self-made man, was a successful one. Niculescu, born in a village of Buzău district, attended the lyceum in Ploiești, his leaving school exam being passed – as customary in the epoch – at the University of București, in 1889. In the autumn of the same year he enrolls for the courses of the Faculty of Medicine in the capital of the country, whose eminent student he soon becomes. Thus, out of the 72 candidates participating to the resident studentship exam, organized by the Ephors of Hospitals, he occupies the 3rd place – examiners’ commission including reputed specialists, such as dr. Severeanu, dr. Drăghicescu and, last but not least, dr. Leonte, who will become one of his dearest professors – ”each year, I passed all my exams in June, never failing one” [2]. In the end of this successful evolution, on May 5 1895, he publicly defends his PhD thesis, entitled “Testicular ectopia and orhido-pexia”, under the guidance of prof. dr. Toma Ionescu, who, in time, will become his most predictive enemy. In the same year, in June, he is awarded the prestigious Hillel prize of the Faculty of Medicine, for his study ”Alcoholism in Romania”.

He resumes his studies in Paris, where he has the opportunity of working, for one year, under the guidance of the famous dr. Cruet, at ”La Charite” hospital. There followed years of practice in other prestigious medical institutions, such as ”Hotel Dieu”, under the surveillance of prof. Pietckiewitz, or ”San Antoine”, where he was monitored by dr. Gaillard. Quite interesting, the recommendation letter to dr. Cruet was signed by the same Toma Ionescu ...

The warrant of the Romanian professor was highly entitled as, later on, dr. Cruet himself confirmed his professional ability by the diploma conferred by ”La Charite”. During this initiation stage in stomatology, he delivers three scientific communications at the XIIIth International Congress of Medicine – Paris, 1900: „Sur le choix des antiseptiques dans le traitement de la carie dentaire“, „Sur le traitement de la stomatite ulcero-membranuse“ and „Sur la redressement des dents par le cordonnet de soie“. Highly possibly, his presence might represent the first participation of a Romanian stomatologist to an international manifestation.

Starting with the year 1900, when he returns to Romania, Dr. Niculescu dedicates himself with all his mights to the discipline, his
reputation being consolidated by the professionalism with which he managed his private dental office, all his patients coming from the wealthy families of the capital. From now on, he will be more and more interested in practising dentistry, yet without neglecting his scientific researches, materialized in an important number of papers, such as: “Elements of clinical and surgical dentistry”, apparently, in his own words,”the first study written in Romanian on mouth hygiene and on dental caries treatment” [2].

In spite of the bitter defeat he suffered in 1906, he will continue – until his death - to militate in favour of the creation, within the Faculty of Medicine of București, of an independent department of stomatology, as well as of the strict application of the sanitary law for preventing the admission of dilettantes in the field, any more. In this way, he came to be viewed as the “black sheet” of the medical system and accused that he would have actually wanted to transform Romanian stomatology into a personal fief.

Expelled by the establishment of the medical education of those times, Niculescu did not give up to fight and created, at his own expenses, a journal entitled “Doctors’ Tribune”, in which he attacked the system, his constant invectives being addressed to professor Toma Ionescu. Undoubtedly, his intentions were good, yet he entirely lacked the art of diplomacy. Today, when such self-important attitudes lost any meaning, re-evaluation of a pioneer of dental education and dental practice should become a must for his followers. Even if defeated, such people should be admired for their constant abnegation, which is the token of one’s personality and disposition. He did not have success in his actions as he was facing alone the general indifference of the medical authorities for the future of dentistry, a situation which, in statistical terms, shows that, in 1910, Romania had only 6 dentists who had graduated academic institutions!

After the Great Union of 1918, Niculescu will have an ally, a colleague from Transylvannia, doctor Gheorghe Bilascu of Cluj, together with whom he will establish a trade union of stomatologists.

In the Transylvannian city, stomatological education was much more advanced, a specialized department having been created as early as 1890, with the support of dr. Wilhelm Vajna, reputed specialist in the domain, and facilitated by the imperial rules of the Habsburgic Empire. In the absence of a suitable location, the practical courses were delivered in a private space. In 1896, dr. Coloman Honcz is nominated reader in stomatology and, consequently, the courses become more attractive for a larger audience, in spite of the precarious conditions in which the activity was performed. The department of dentistry had only two modestly-equipped rooms, with only three dental chairs, permitting only extractions and conservative treatments, as no laboratory of dental technique existed. Stomatological education was an optional discipline, so that only few students were interested in it. This was the situation in Cluj in the year 1919, when, among the great personalities who came here as university professors, such as Victor Babeş or Emil Racoviţă, mention should be also made by the dentist Gheorghe Bilaşcu, who came from Budapest, invited to lead the existing Clinics. His first thought was of putting dentistry in the position it was entitled to hold among the other medical disciplines.

Convinced by the necessity of creating a permanent course of stomatology, as well as a school of dentistry in Cluj, on December 26, 1919, he addresses the Council of the University, his professional prestige and enthusiasm convincing the responsible ones to approve, one year later, his initiatives. The first steps were extremely difficult, as he will evoke the moment in his opening speech, delivered at the IInd National Congress of Stomatology, held in Cluj, between May 27-28, 1923:
“I came in this most beloved part of my country wishing to dedicate my modest forces to its progress. Regretfully, I confess that I had to give up all my illusions and expectations on the recognition this scientific branch enjoys in civilized countries. I have never imagined that an action meant at supporting science and general well-being could be ruined by ignorance, hostility and indolence from the part of those expected to promote it. I simply will not describe the ordeal I suffered as I strived to create a Clinic of Stomatology within the Faculties of Medicine of Romania” [3].

In the same year, statistical data show that the Clinic records between 50 and 100 consultations each day, among whom 15-30 patients come for the first time. The didactic staff of the clinic was formed of: a manager, a lecturer, an assistant, two budgetary tutors, an extra-budgetary tutor, three honorary tutors. The auxiliary staff included: a technician, a laboratory assistant, two nurses and a maid. In the academic year 1919-1920, the students attending these courses twice a week, and daily practic works in groups of 10 were only 20, their number increasing to 77 in the second term. In the 1920/1921 academic year, term I registered 297 students, and term II - 170. In the year to come, the situation was even worse: 86 students along term I and 32 along term II. Such a significant difference is a consequence of the war, as several generations of students were mobilized and forced to interrupt or even give up their studies. One should not forget that the youths of Transylvania, the former Austrian-Hungarian province, participated to the First World War along all its 4 years, not only between 1916-1918, as the young ones of Romania.


After the first world war, the two pionieers of Romanian stomatology struggled hard to establish and develop an academic education structure of dentistry and also to eliminate the widespread imposture manifested in this medical branch, encouraged by the sanitary law of 1923, which granted the right to dental practice to obscure possessors of unreliable diplomas. In most of the cases, such persons came from the newly-annexed Basarabia, in the Russian Empire the status of the dentist being even more intricate than in Romania. Having in view this situation, they tried to convince the leaders of the Romanian medical system, and also the politicians, that dental art is an authentic branch of medicine and not an empirical occupation, whose practising should be strictly organized.

Fully conscious of the fact that only a joint action of the dentists could assure emancipation of stomatology in our country, on May 25, 1922, in Cluj, the two doctors created the Association of Romanian Dentists, whose members will include all accredited stomatologists. In Romania there already existed a general association of doctors from all medical specialities, which, however, did not operate as an union trade, having rather the decorative character of a corporation classified list. D.D. Niculescu attempted at reorganizing it for rendering it more active, but his colleagues could not give up their self-conservation attitude, and the project failed.

Under the auspices of the new association, the stomatologist of Bucureşti, together with his colleague of Cluj, insisted on the modification of the sanitary law, drawing the attention on the fact that no specialist in the domain had been consulted or invited to participate to the elaboration of the regulations on the statute of the dentist. They organize stomatological congresses, bringing into discussion, repeatedly, the amendments that might have annihilated the highly improvised character of the law, address numerous petitions to the Parliament of the country, all in vain. During one of the congresses, held in September 1923 in Bucureşti, Bilaşcu expresses loudly the feelings of exasperation and helplessness experienced by the whole corporation: ”Few months have passed since our annual Congress, organized in Cluj ... the actual situation, the total decline of our speciality forced us to hold an
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extraordinary congress here, in the capital” [5]. Each item is analyzed in detail, together with the errors or deficiencies of the law, the participants to the congress agreeing that such a regulation favours the dental technicians who actually practise dentistry, as well as those without specialized studies in the field. Even in Transylvania and Bukovina, where, before the war, the Austrian-Hungarian laws stated that dentists should have graduated a high education medical school, clandestine stomatologists appeared, protected by the new regulations. Equally, in those times, in Bucureşti, dentistry was practised by no less than 300 false specialists!

The result of the debates on such themes was the organization of a new trial, according to which the dentists that could not produce a proof of their accredited studies in the field were to be re-examined by a ministry commission led by dr. Mina Minovici. The results obtained were hardly satisfactory, as numerous impostors succeeded in obtaining the right of free practice. However, the conflict between the two continued, both of them resorting to the newly created association, whose leaders they had been, permanently and constantly supporting its activity. Unfortunately, neither of them lived to see their dreams come true, as Bilaşcu died in 1928, and Niculescu in 1935, the Department of Stomatology at the Faculty in Bucureşti being founded only in 1936, only after the disappearance of the “tsar” of Romanian medicine, Toma Ionescu, the cliff against which all expectations of an entire medical branch, fighting for its recognition as an independent domain, had been broken.

References