

## • HISTORICAL NOTE •

### Francisco Guerra (1916-2011), Medical Historian for the World and Puerto Rico

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This brief celebration of the work of Francisco Guerra (1916-2011) highlights his role as mentor for an international community, his study of local events in the context of global developments, and his contributions to the understanding of the medical history of Puerto Rico. A selective review of Francisco Guerra's methods and publications shows that his principal works are characterized by their vast scope and exhaustive coverage of ancient and modern published sources, coupled with clarity and conciseness of exposition. At least eight of his books (presented here) provide important information on events and personalities in Puerto Rico up to about 1940. Guerra, through his clinical experience, profound scholarship, and personal contacts, recovered the local medical developments of peripheral areas and incorporated them to a global context. [*P R Health Sci J* 2012;2:72-74]

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**F**rancisco Guerra (Torrelavega, 1916-Madrid, 2011), best known as historian of medicine and bibliophile, can also be considered one of the great soldier-writers of Spain, in the tradition of Garcilaso de la Vega and Miguel de Cervantes. In his youth he served as military physician in the Army of the Spanish Republic (1936-1939). In a long exile in Mexico, the United States, and Great Britain he developed his interests in books, history, pharmacology, patient care, and teaching. He returned permanently to Spain in 1973. From 1946 to 2007, he published over 76 books and monographs and more than 300 articles on pharmacology, history of medicine, and medical bibliography (1, 2).



Francisco Guerra, San Juan, December 1983. (Photo by José G. Rigau-Pérez)

In this brief celebration of Guerra's work, I wish to highlight his role as mentor for an international community, his study of local events in the context of global developments and his contributions to the understanding of the medical history of Puerto Rico. The following paragraphs present a selective review of Francisco Guerra's work methods and publications, with emphasis on the author's experience as his student, and Guerra's texts related to Puerto Rico.

#### Francisco Guerra as mentor

Francisco Guerra taught many Puerto Ricans during his tenure as professor at the medical school of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). He appears briefly in the memoirs of Guillermo Arbona, Secretary of Health of

Puerto Rico, as the only full-time faculty member at the UNAM medical school in 1953 (3). Dr. Guerra and I met in Madrid, on January 19, 1977. I was then a second-year resident in Pediatrics at the Children's Hospital Medical Center (CHMC) in Boston. My interest in the history of medicine had developed in medical school and deepened through a one-month elective devoted to research on smallpox epidemics and their control in Puerto Rico. The subject demanded access to Spanish archives and the guidance of a historian with experience in the areas of Spanish and American medicine. I had written to a well-known medical historian in Madrid, but had received no answer. Estrellita Karsh, a friend and historian of medicine who had met Guerra when he was a scholar at Yale University, talked to him about me during an international conference in Canada. He immediately wrote to offer his guidance. Shortly thereafter, a research elective provided the opportunity to work together. An open-minded Residency Training Committee at CHMC approved three weeks of historical investigation as a valid task in a pediatrician's training, in relation to the general subject of the development of public health policies in Puerto Rico.

The time was short, and Guerra was the right mentor. In 36 hours, he reviewed my preliminary manuscript and provided

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suggestions for improvement; introduced me to the principal medical historians in Madrid; obtained for me the necessary letters of recommendation, and took me to the reference library and the historical archive where I would begin my documentary search. As a result, I was able to quickly publish my first article in a medical journal, on Dr. Francisco Oller, the first vaccinator in Puerto Rico, and an analysis of his conflicts with Dr. Francisco Xavier de Balmis, the director of the Spanish smallpox vaccine expedition of 1803-1813 (4, 5).

As Guerra's efficiency might suggest, his style was forthright, to the point of frankness. He was a tall, lean, elegant man; impressive and even intimidating (to me, at least) on first acquaintance. Nevertheless, his generosity, dry humor, and courtesy in attending to the needs of an inexperienced young stranger, and the honesty, erudition, and wisdom in his advice, won my admiration and gratitude. Only slowly did I learn about some of his experiences in war and exile. In one of my last visits, in response to his excitement about the acquisition of a work by William Harvey, I asked him to stop writing about Harvey and to write about his life, but he gently changed the subject.

Dr. Guerra linked a network of friends and collaborators throughout the world. We would meet at international conferences or in Madrid (he came to San Juan in December, 1983), but most often we would exchange queries by mail. He would relay questions from other friends, or would inquire about specific facts on Puerto Rico, for his books. He developed global texts with a surprising amount of local data, through a hardly equaled mastery of the published literature, but also through the field research of his international acquaintances. They included friends from many walks of life – historians, physicians, nuns in charge of health care institutions. He kept track of their contributions and invariably thanked each one publicly, in the foreword of the corresponding book.

### Puerto Rico in Guerras's publications

Guerra's principal works are characterized by their vast scope and exhaustive coverage of ancient and modern published sources, coupled with clarity and conciseness of exposition. In consequence, the reader is never lost among the details. Although Guerra published in diverse languages, many of his books were written in Spanish, and their encyclopedic format sometimes excluded them from the book reviews provided by history journals. Researchers who rely on computerized systems for bibliographic searches will be deprived of the benefit of his research on hard-to-find sources and out-of-the-way locations; will miss his conclusions based on both historical and clinical expertise; and will ignore, at their peril, his contributions to medical, nutritional, epidemiologic, bibliographic, and political controversies.

None of Guerra's books mention Puerto Rico in the title, but many provide important information on events and

personalities in the Island up to about 1940. His attention to the historiography of such a limited area suggests the magnitude of the totality of his work and its significance for the history of medicine. The following list includes only some of his books, and covers none of his articles. It is intended as a tribute to Guerra's work and as a guide for researchers. The books are presented in chronological order of the period of Puerto Rican history that they cover best.

- *La medicina precolombina*. Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica; 1990. The medical practices of the Taíno culture of the Antilles are described in pages 187-190.
- *Epidemiología americana y filipina 1492-1898*. Madrid: Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo; 1999. The book opens with a disclosure of the author's personal research on the diseases to be discussed, particularly typhus and influenza. The most important sources of demographic and medical information for the period 1492-1898 in the Americas and the Philippines are then discussed. Four succeeding chapters (Iberian man, American man, Iberian diseases, and American diseases) show the hallmark of Guerra's writing — panoramic range and terse exposition. For Guerra, "the most important epidemiologic fact in pre-Columbian nosology is the absence of viral diseases" (p. 88) and therefore the lack of immunity to them. "Epidemic chronology" presents a 432-page annotated list of 1,631 epidemics in humans and animals in a 406-year period, from Alaska to Patagonia and from Barbados to the Philippines, often providing the number of the dead and the size of populations, to document the astonishing mortality rates of infections. Three short chapters summarize the impact of these events and the societal responses, such as religious interpretations, the establishment of hospitals, and the treatment and prevention methods. Guerra correlates epidemics and population estimates to show the devastating effect of the first century of contact between natives and Europeans, from Canada to Chile. The remaining 210 pages provide summary listings of the epidemics by disease, and annual population censuses for cities from Boston to Manila, including, as available, natality and mortality, with especially abundant data for Mexico City and Havana. A 63-page bibliography in nine languages shows the book's broad and deep foundations, and engagement with the most recent authors.
- *El hospital en Hispanoamérica y Filipinas*. Madrid: Ministerio de Sanidad y Consumo; 1994. The 52 hospitals established in Puerto Rico from 1511 to 1898 appear in pages 77-90.
- *Historia de la medicina*. Third edition, Madrid: Ediciones Norma; 2007. In this global history of medicine, Puerto Rico appears in pages 282-283 (public health and clinical medicine, 1768-1855), 412-415 (internal medicine, erudite physicians, hospitals, scientific journals, 1839-ca. 1920), and 528-531 (surgery, 1839-ca. 1940).

- *La educación médica en Hispanoamérica y Filipinas durante el dominio español*. Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá; 1998. Puerto Rico (1809-1898) appears in pages 67-70.
- *Bibliografía médica americana y filipina. Período formativo*. 2 volumes, Madrid: Ollero y Ramos; 1999. The author presents the medical works published in all countries of the Americas, from Canada to Chile, plus the Philippines, until each country declared independence, or up to 1898 (1900 for the British Antilles). There are 135 works mentioned as published in Puerto Rico from 1807 to 1898 (volume 2: 697-723), but additional texts about Puerto Rico or by Puerto Rican physicians were published in Spain and Cuba.
- *El médico político. Estudios biográficos sobre la influencia del médico en la Historia Política de Hispanoamérica y Filipinas*. Madrid: Afrodisio Aguado; 1975. A biography of Ramón E. Betances (1827-1898, among the "Apostles of Independence") occupies pages 49-51. José Antonio Lanauze (1893-1951) is included in "The Guides of Socialism", in pages 180-181. Puerto Rican physician-politicians are mentioned in pages 214-215 and 252-253; abolitionists in pages 269-270, and one of the first female physicians, María Elisa Rivera (1887-1981), in page 279. (Guerra did not mention Dr. Ana Janer, who graduated in the same medical school class as Dr. Rivera in 1909; both share the claim to the title of "first Puerto Rican female physician".)
- *La medicina en el exilio republicano*. Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá de Henares; 2003. Nine physicians (Agustín Cortés Martínez, Víctor Cuquerella Gomar, José Antonio García Galarza, José García Madrid, Carlos Gubern Puig, Emilio Morayta Núñez, José Luis Ortega López, Ángel Rodríguez-Olleros Rodríguez, Rafael Troyano de los Ríos) and one psychologist (Mercedes Rodrigo Bellido) are included among the exiled Spanish health professionals who established their practice in Puerto Rico after 1939 (pages 485-487, 710) (6). A recent publication has added names to this list, but does not include Ortega and Rodrigo (7).

## Conclusion

In his last text, Guerra expressed the hope that it would "allow physicians to get to know their predecessors and the evolution of their art" (8). Generations of readers will admire and be grateful for his efforts, in every region of the world where his clinical experience and profound scholarship brought to light medical developments in their global context.

## Resumen

Esta celebración breve de la labor de Francisco Guerra (1916-2011) resalta su rol como mentor para una comunidad internacional, su estudio de eventos locales en el contexto de desarrollos globales, y sus contribuciones al esclarecimiento de la historia de la medicina en Puerto Rico. Una revisión selectiva de los métodos de trabajo y las publicaciones de Francisco Guerra demuestra que sus obras principales se caracterizan por su ámbito amplio, cobertura exhaustiva de fuentes impresas antiguas y modernas, y exposición clara y concisa. De sus libros, al menos ocho (presentados aquí) proveen información importante sobre eventos y personalidades en Puerto Rico hasta cerca de 1940. Guerra, mediante su experiencia clínica, erudición y contactos personales, recuperó los eventos médicos locales de áreas periféricas y los incorporó al contexto histórico global.

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