

E1 ORAL PRESENTATION – ABSTRACT

Tracing Ancient Therapies: The Use of Silver and Mercury

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ABSTRACT: Knowledge of health and disease in past populations relies partially on the study of therapeutic practices. When available, such information is mainly derived from contemporary documentary and iconographic sources, which do not allow to determine whether these practices were effectively applied to specific individuals. The present study aims to identify possible treatments involving silver and mercury in children.

A total of 100 individuals, dated between the 17th and 19th centuries, and aged between 0 and 11 years at death, exhumed from the Convent of São Domingos (1241–1834) in Lisbon, were analysed using a portable X-ray fluorescence (pXRF) device. Of these, 97 individuals presented traces of silver and 26 of mercury. Both elements showed similar concentrations in the cranium and long bones. Silver concentrations decrease with age at death, whereas mercury levels showed no variation in relation to age.

Some individuals exhibited macroscopic lesions compatible with diagnoses of scurvy, rickets, or syphilis. Considering that this Convent was located near the Royal Hospital of All Saints, it is plausible that these children may have received medical care. Silver was used in the treatment of conditions such as gastroenteritis, gonorrhoea, syphilis, or neonatal ophthalmia, while mercury was employed in the treatment of syphilis, fevers, pediculosis, and as a laxative, sedative, or paediatric analgesic, among other uses. Maternal ingestion of these substances, or their transmission through wet nursing, also constitutes a plausible hypothesis.

As the applied technique does not involve bone destruction, it proves to be particularly promising for the study of therapeutic practices in the past.

KEYWORDS: 17th and 19th centuries, Convent of São Domingos, Lisbon, Mercury, pXRF, rickets, Royal Hospital of All Saints, scurvy, Silver, syphilis.