

The XV International Congress of Medicine (Lisbon, April 1906): 120 Years Later

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ABSTRACT: The XV International Congress of Medicine, held in Lisbon in April 1906, was the most important international scientific event ever organized in Portugal prior to the First World War, bringing together more than 2,000 international participants, not including accompanying persons. Many of the leading figures in world medicine were present. This congress provided Portuguese physicians with direct contact with the most advanced medical knowledge of the time. This article revisits the circumstances that led to the organization of the congress, highlights its scientific and social program and discusses its impact on the development and internationalization of Portuguese medicine. One hundred and twenty years later, this congress remains a landmark in the history of Portuguese medicine.

KEYWORDS: History of Medicine; XV International Congress of Medicine; 1906; Lisbon; Miguel Bombarda.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, awareness of health challenges implied an increasingly active and effective response from medicine to the serious problems being faced worldwide. The development of medicine was progressively gaining momentum. The exchange of knowledge needed to be enhanced, and personal contact became imperative to promote the sharing of ideas.

In France, annual medical congresses had already been held since 1863 in various cities. At the 1865 congress held in Bordeaux, the possibility was raised of taking advantage of the 1867 Paris Universal Exposition (April–November) to organize an international medical congress, as it would certainly attract a large number of health professionals from all over the world. This congress, which would become the *I Congrès International de Médecine*, took place in August with around 1,500 participants and was an extraordinarily successful event. This success stimulated the organization of new editions every three years, held in several European cities and, on one occasion, in the United States (Washington, 1887), becoming the largest global medical events of their era, attended by physicians and other health professionals from all over the world. (Table 1)

TABLE 1. International Congresses of Medicine (1867–1913).

Number	Year	Location
1st	1867	Paris, France
2nd	1869	Florence, Italy
3rd	1873	Vienna, Austria
4th	1875	Brussels, Belgium
5th	1877	Geneva, Switzerland
6th	1879	Amsterdam, The Netherlands
7th	1881	London, United Kingdom
8th	1884	Copenhagen, Denmark
9th	1887	Washington, D.C., United States
10th	1890	Berlin, Germany
11th	1894	Rome, Italy
12th	1897	Moscow, Russia
13th	1900	Paris, France
14th	1903	Madrid, Spain
15th	1906	Lisbon, Portugal
16th	1909	Budapest, Hungary
17th	1913	London, United Kingdom

We thus arrive at the XIV International Congress of Medicine, which took place in Madrid in 1903. Among the approximately 10,000 participants, there were about 200 Portuguese delegates. The idea of bringing the next congress to Portugal was discussed among some of the Portuguese participants. Miguel Bombarda, Professor at the Medical School of Lisbon and an active politician, was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Portuguese bid. The first steps were taken by telegraphing Lisbon, communicating these intentions to Prime Minister Hintze Ribeiro and request-

ing the necessary support. While the Madrid congress was still in session, a positive response arrived, and the Portuguese delegation therefore proposed that the XV International Congress of Medicine should take place in Lisbon in April 1906. Bombarda was unanimously appointed Secretary-General of the future congress.

Despite the initial enthusiasm, the difficulties involved in organizing such an event at the beginning of the twentieth century were immediately apparent in a country facing serious economic difficulties, political instability, and no previous experience in organizing events of this magnitude. The conditions required for hosting the congress and all the associated logistics were, from the outset, a source of concern that urgently needed to be addressed: how could thousands of participants and their companions be accommodated? Where would the scientific sessions take place? How could a programme be organized that was not only scientifically valuable but also socially engaging, leaving participants with lasting memories? Upon returning to Lisbon, Miguel Bombarda urged the government to complete the building intended to house the Medical-Surgical School, as this would be the ideal venue for the congress. He made it clear that this was a *sine qua non* condition for proceeding with the project, since construction work was progressing slowly. Furthermore, these brand-new and fully functional facilities, enriched by frescoes, tiles, paintings, and sculptures, would provide the dignity and prestige appropriate to an event of such importance (Fig. 1).



Fig 1. Official announcement of the XV International Congress of Medicine, Lisboa, depicting the new building where the congress would be headquartered

To ensure the success of the congress, it is worth highlighting the excellent coordination and the almost general mobilization that guaranteed everything proceeded smoothly. Miguel Bombarda worked tirelessly, contacting and inviting many Portuguese physicians to participate in various capacities, including chairing sessions in different medical specialties, while simultaneously having to overcome certain personal rivalries and conflicts.

This congress was of decisive importance for the progress of Portuguese medicine, which remained largely isolated from the main currents of European medicine and, therefore, out of step with the rapid advances emerging in Europe and the United States.^[3] A collective effort was successfully mobilized to properly welcome such an important and numerous group of professionals, totalling about 2,000 people, in addition to their companions.^[4]

The inaugural session took place in the Portugal Hall, the main hall of the Lisbon Geographical Society (*Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*), which was filled well beyond its capacity. It was presided over by King Carlos I, accompanied by Queen Amélia of Orléans and the Queen Mother, Maria Pia of Savoy. (Fig. 2) The congress included 17 sections and approximately 500 meetings and sessions.^[2]

The facilities included several amphitheatres and multiple smaller rooms where hundreds of meetings took place. Special mention should be made of the Projection Room (Fig. 3), an innovation in which surgical procedures performed by Dr Eugène Doyen were shown, creating a considerable impact and leading to repeated screenings at the request of attendees. The Cancer Section debated the prevailing theory that attributed these diseases to infectious causes. It was likely from this point onward that the Portuguese physician Francisco Gentil began the path that would eventually lead him to head the fight against cancer in Portugal. Communicable diseases were also widely debated in both the Infectious Diseases and Public Health sections. Professor Ricardo Jorge, a renowned Portuguese authority in public health, chaired the latter, and the principal topics included the scourge of tuberculosis, together with diphtheria, smallpox, leprosy, and other diseases affecting the world at the time.

In the Colonial and Tropical Medicine section, advances in combating the tsetse fly attracted considerable attention, an area in which Portugal played an important role, particularly in São Tomé and Príncipe under the leadership of Dr. Ayres Kopke.

In addition to lectures and scientific sessions, the programme featured study visits to hospital units, the Barbadinhos water pumping station, the Lisbon Cen-



Fig 2. Opening session of the XV International Congress of Medicine, presided over by the Portuguese Royal Family, April 19th 1906. (Source: *Ilustração Portuguesa*)



Fig 3. The Projections Room
(Source: *Ilustração Portuguesa*, April 20th, 1906 p315)



Fig 4. Social program for the visit to Vila Franca de Xira, April 22nd, 1906
(Source: Library - Faculdade de Medicina - Universidade de Lisboa)

tral Prison, the Royal Bacteriological Institute, and the naval quarantine station, among other institutions, according to participants' interests. Of particular note was the lively daily social programme.

Besides the inaugural session on 19 April, on 20 April a garden party was hosted in Sintra by the Count of Monserrate, a wealthy English gentleman settled in Lisbon. On 21 April, King Carlos hosted a dinner for the delegates of the various countries. Particularly memorable was the of 22 April, which featured a boat trip from Lis-

bon to Vila Franca de Xira, where an equestrian display took place, followed by a traditional bullfight. The return journey was made by train to Rossio Station in the centre of Lisbon (Fig. 4). On 23 April, a garden party hosted by the King took place at the Necessidades Royal Palace, for which, according to contemporary press reports, more than five thousand invitations were issued. On 24 April, a reception was again held at the *Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, and finally, on 25 April, a reception took place at Lisbon City Hall, hosted by the Mayor of Lisbon.

It is worth noting that Lisbon at that time lacked adequate hotel infrastructure to accommodate so many visitors. In addition to the few suitably equipped hotels, it was necessary to distribute congress participants among private residences and the homes of several Lisbon physicians. However, a providential solution came in the form of a commercial vessel which, besides bringing delegates from the United Kingdom, served as a floating hotel during the congress (Fig. 5).

The congress was remembered by most participants not only for its scientific quality but also for the excellence of its organization, hospitality, and social programme.

This congress constituted a milestone for Portuguese medicine, enabling contacts with leading figures of international medicine and giving rise to exchanges and training opportunities abroad.

The number and distinction of participants were impressive. Among them were Paul Richer, Édouard Brissaud, Ramón y Cajal, Karl Landsteiner, Élie Metchnikoff, Albert Neisser, Wilhelm Waldeyer, Pierre Robin, Adolphe Pinard, Paul Ehrlich, and Oswaldo Cruz, among many others.

In Portugal, the following years witnessed a development to which this congress was not unrelated. In 1911, with the creation of the Universities of Lisbon and Porto and their respective Faculties of Medicine, this new direction was confirmed. In Lisbon, in particular, what became known as the “medical generation of 1911” emerged. The importance attributed to Miguel Bombarda’s contribution to the organization and success of the congress is illustrated by the commemorative medal issued in his recognition (Fig. 6).

The International Congresses continued to be held at approximately three-year intervals: Budapest in 1909 and London in 1913. However, the outbreak of the Great War permanently interrupted these events. It was the end of an era.

As 120 years have passed since this remarkable event, it is only fitting to remember it and reflect upon its impact on Portuguese medicine.



Fig 5. The ship *Ophir*, which brought delegates from the United Kingdom and served as a floating hotel during the Congress (Source: Library - Faculdade de Medicina - Universidade de Lisboa)



Fig 6. Commemorative medal in honor of Professor Miguel Bombarda for his contribution to the organization and success of the congress. Inscription: “To Professor Miguel Bombarda, from the Portuguese Doctors and Congress Participants”. (property of the author)

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