

Interview with Charles Savona-Ventura

by Marika Azzopardi

"I qualified as a Medical Doctor from the University of Malta in 1979. I then proceeded to complete my two-year housemanship working in the major departments - medicine, surgery and obstetrics/gynaecology. During my first assignment in Obs-Gyn I confirmed my interest in that subject and elected to attempt to specialize. At the end of my statutory housemanship period, I applied to join the Obs-Gyn Department and was accepted. I passed for my Part I MRCOG examination in 1982 and eventually was selected to join the joint specialization program between Malta and Belgium which enabled me to 'polish' my expertise in Leuven, Belgium. I was accredited as a specialist from the Catholic University of Leuven in 1985. Afterwards I spent some time in Northern Ireland before sitting for the Part II MRCOG examination in 1986."

Dr Savona-Ventura admits he has always been interested in Melitensia and was specifically introduced to Maltese history in the early 1970s, during his MD course. His summer job as a 'courier' with students brought over to Malta to learn English through the NSTS, led him to attend a series of lectures discussing various aspects of Malta. "These served to indicate to me the richness of Maltese culture. This tied in with my then particular interest in natural history, including geology. My specific interest in medical history was stimulated by listening to lectures given by the late Dr Paul Cassar who used items of historical interest to illustrate his arguments in contemporary medical management."

However, these growing new interests had to be sidetracked whilst he was studying for his specialization but came to the fore again when the studies were completed. "In attempting to learn more about Maltese medical history, I came to realise that the only worthwhile comprehensive book available on the topic was dated 1964 and was unavailable. With increasing reading and researches in primary and secondary sources, I could fully appreciate the truth of the words of the 14th century surgeon Guy de Chauliac who said that, "We are like children standing on the shoulders of a giant, for we can see all that the giant can see, and a little more."

Whilst in Malta there are many medical practitioners who show a definite interest in medical history, only the occasional one contributes to the common knowledge of the subject. Dr Savona-Ventura laments how the subject is given no importance by the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Malta and feels it is high time for the introduction of a short module on the subject. "I would recommend a short module of say, twelve lectures, to be introduced in the curriculum of studies with maybe a long essay submission for assessment. There is a place also to appoint an honorary lecturer in the subject - a point mooted by Dr Paul Cassar in the 1970s."



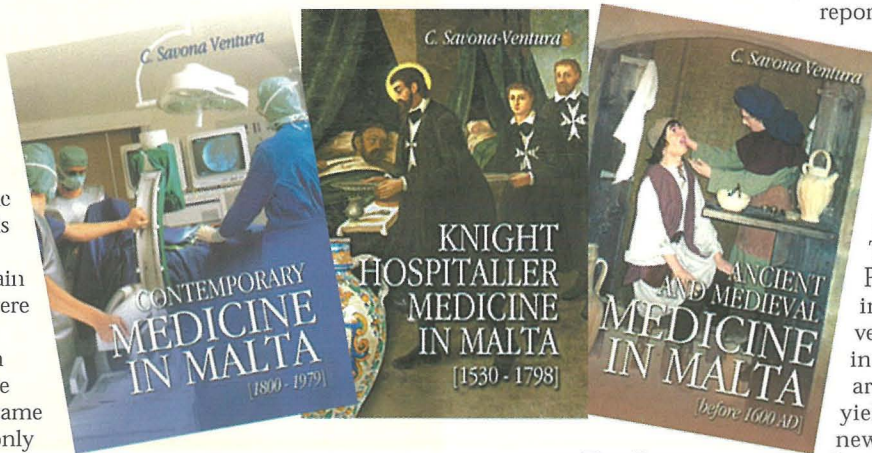
Charles Savona-Ventura, is a man of medicine through and through. An appreciated specialist in the field of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, he is also the author of important books about medicine in Malta and this sheds light on his other passion – medical history. He tells TheSynapse something of his first steps in the realm of medicine.

Amongst the books published by this researcher are a series of three very important publications which encompass the whole spectrum of Maltese medical history – 'Ancient and Medieval Medicine in Malta', 'Hospitaller Medicine in Malta' and 'Contemporary Medicine in Malta'. Asked about these literary contributions Dr Savona-Ventura explains, "I have written about all the various periods of our medical history ranging from prehistoric times to the present. These works have been presented in various books, monographs and papers. Every period has its own characteristics and interests. The Prehistory of Malta is characterised by the unique Temple Period and it is exciting to review the excavation

reports and findings, and use the process of cognitive archaeology to interpret these in the light of man's struggle for survival against hunger and disease. The Hospitaller Period is also a rich interesting period, very well documented in the local archives - archives repeatedly yielding something new whenever they are

looked at. The British Period of course is the best documented and accessible with detailed statistical data - the right tools for anyone interested in historical epidemiology. Learning history does help plan for the future. It has been said that "those who forget history will have to repeat it".

Asked how much time is required in his study and research on medical history, Dr Savona-Ventura states that one cannot quantify time for carrying out study and research, especially since he looks upon his writing endeavours as a hobby to help him relax from the heavy clinical workload of hospital and private practice. "There are times when research work is lax and general, others when it is more directed and detailed. I have spent the last six years on very heavy detailed research in preparation for my last three comprehensive volumes on the Medical History of the Maltese Islands and one on the Order of St. Lazarus. At the moment, work is more relaxed - until a major project presents itself again."



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Studying medical history intensifies the fact that present day practitioners vividly depend on the thoughts and research of those who came before us, helping in the understanding of why the origins of modern-day practices are so ingrained in modern practice. Dr Savona Ventura cites the 18th century German Poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who said that "It is only when we know very little about a subject that we are quite sure; and with knowledge, doubt arises and grows."

What about indigenous herbs? Many of today's medications have origins in plant products. "The 19th century saw a rise in the knowledge of chemistry - a rise that led to the pharmaceutical production of medicine - first as plant extracts, later as chemically produced products. The advantage of chemical production is the purity and standardization of dosage. There were few indigenous 'material medica' from Malta used before the

advent of pharmaceutical agents - these were 'St. Paul's rock' supposedly useful against poison and fever, and the plant from the Fungus Rock supposedly useful against haemorrhage. These are definitely not used today in any form."

As a final question to this authentic researcher, Synapse asks, "If a foreigner had to ask you to describe Maltese medical history in a few words - how would you describe it?" "In spite of Malta being such a small island, it has a very rich medical history culture. Also that Maltese practitioners have significantly contributed to the general medical knowledge of their times. Examples include: Prof. Barth who was appointed as the first ophthalmological professor in Europe; the researches by animal experimentation of Surgeon MA Grima; the work of Sir T. Zammit in Brucellosis; and other contributions made by other Maltese specialists during the twentieth century." ☐

N A T U R E R E V I S I T E D

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Figure 2: *Bonellia viridis*

Phylum ECHIUROIDA; Class: BONELLIIDAE
The Spoonworm – Bonellia viridis

This species is a marine worm which is found in crevices and holes on the seabed, from where its proboscis projects, feeling around for food. Its beneficial role in medicine has yet to be determined but studies carried out by the Chemistry Department of the University of Malta have shown that the animal contains a substance named bonellin which causes haemolysis of erythrocytes, besides exhibiting other in vitro bioactivity such as depressing oxygen uptake of spermatozoa.⁵ ☐

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