



Revista Mexicana de Oftalmología

www.elsevier.es/mexoftalmo



HISTORY OF OPHTHALMOLOGY IN MEXICO

The 18th and 19th centuries: the first institutions dedicated to ophthalmology in Mexico

Jaime Lozano Alcázar

Medical Director, Fundación Hospital Nuestra Señora de la Luz, Ciudad de México, Mexico

Care for eye conditions in Mexico can be traced back to the pre-Columbian era. Documented information is known about the diverse treatments used by the indigenous peoples for the different eye conditions, that were designated with their specific name. It is believed that the *teixpati*, as the Aztecs called those who practiced eye surgery, couched cataracts, as was then done in Europe and Asia, only instead of using metal instruments they used agave thorns.

The Conquista brought with it European knowledge on managing diseases and eye conditions. The first book on medicine written and printed in Mexico, that we know about, was printed in 1570 (*Opera Medicinalia in qbus qz plurima extant scitu medico necessaria in. 4. Li. digesta, que pagina versa continentur. Authore Francisco Brauo Orsune si doctore ac Mexicano medico. Mexici, apud Petrum Ocharte. Cum privilegio [1570]*). Years later, the *Tractado Breue de Chirvrgia, y del Conocimiento y cvra de algvnas enfermedades, q. en esta tierra mas comúnmente suelen auer. Hecho por el Mvy Reverendo Padre Fray Agustín Farfan, Religioso de la Orden de Sancto Agustín, Doctor en Medicina, y graduado en esta insigne Vniversidad de Mexico. En Mexico, En Casa de Antonio Ricardo. Año de 1579, was released. It comprised 6 “treatises”; in the first, chapter VII, the following appears: “On the Anatomy of the eyes”. In the third treatise, chapter III: “On the inflammation of the face and eyes, and their tumours or abscesses”. In the fifth treatise, chapter VIII: “On curing the ulcers of the eyes, and the face”, and chapter IX: “On fistula or aegilops forming in the tear ducts, and on the viscera, and nasal polyps”. Other medicine books written by Friar Agustín Farfán, who was also known as Dr García Farfán, were also published in the 16th and 17th*

centuries.¹ Later authors continued writing about ophthalmological topics.

There is no doubt that eye diseases were treated in New Spain by doctors and surgeons trained in Spanish or Latin in their particular practices, and they surely also cared for eye diseases in the hospitals that had been founded. In Mexico City alone, at least 9 hospitals were founded in the 16th century: the oldest hospital in Mexico was founded by Hernán Cortés, the Hospital de la Inmaculada Concepción y Jesús Nazareno (1522), followed in chronological order by the Hospital Real de San Lázaro 1 (1524), the Hospital de Santa Fe de México (1532), Hospital del Amor de Dios (1539), the Hospital Real de San José de los Naturales (1553), the Hospital Real de San Pedro o de la Santísima Trinidad (1557), the Hospital Real de San Hipólito (1567), the Hospital Real de San Lázaro 2 (1572), the Hospital Real de la Epifanía y Nuestra Señora de los Desamparados, San Juan de Dios (1582), and the Hospital de Nuestra Señora de Montserrat (1590). Naturally, in the largest cities other hospitals were founded, for example: the Hospital de Nuestra Señora de Belén in Perote (1535); the Hospital de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios in Campeche (1540); the Hospital de la Santa Veracruz in Guadalajara (1557); the Hospital Real de Nuestra Señora del Rosario in Mérida (1562); the Hospital de la Santa Cruz in Oaxtepec (1569); the Hospital Real de San Cosme y San Damián in Oaxaca (1570); the Hospital de la Limpia y Pura Concepción in Jalapa (1570); the Hospital de nuestra Señora de la Consolación in Acapulco (c. 1575); the Hospital de San José de Gracia in Querétaro (1586); the Hospital Real de San Miguel de Belén in Guadalajara (1587); the Hospital de la Caridad de Nombre de Dios in Durango (1588); the Hospital de la Purísima

E-mail: drjaimelozano@gmail.com

ma Concepción in Colima (1599), and many others that would be too long to list.^{2,3}

The notable 19th century surgeon with outstanding skill for cataract surgery, Luis José Muñoz or José Miguel Muñoz, after practising with ram's eyes, began to perform cataract operations on patients at the Hospital Real (sic) at the start of the 19th century.⁴

The first indication I have managed to find of an institution founded especially for caring for eye patients dates back to 1750, when the count of Regla, Pedro Romero de Terreros, founded a hospital for eye patients in the *Ara-Coeli* Retreat House. After this institution closed, the patients were taken to the Hospital de San Andrés.⁴

Dr José María Vértiz Delgado (1812-1876) directed an ophthalmology clinic founded by Francisco Fagoaga, brother of the marquis of Valle.⁵ The institution disappeared without leaving a trace. It is known that the same Dr Vértiz, in the "Hospital for the Poor", performed around 102 cataract operations.⁶

Towards the middle of the 19th century there were 8 hospitals in Mexico City: the Hospital de Jesús, the Hospital de San Juan de Dios, the Hospital del Divino Salvador, the Hospital de Hombres Dementes, the Hospital de San Lázaro, the Hospital de San Andrés and the Hospital de San Pedro, which was founded to treat the injured from the invasion by the United States.⁷ The largest in the city and the country was the Hospital de San Andrés.

In 1779, Mexico City was devastated by a severe smallpox epidemic, which motivated the archbishop Alonso Núñez de Haro y Peralta to use the facilities of the Colegio de San Andrés, abandoned since the Jesuits were expelled on 24 June 1767 when the viceroy Carlos Francisco Croix, marquis of Croix, executed the order received from King Carlos III in New Spain. The archbishop gave funds out of his own pocket to renovate the building, which had fallen into disrepair. Once the emergency caused by the epidemic was over, leaving between 8,000 and 22,000 dead in the capital, according to different accounts,^{8,9} the building continued functioning as a hospital until 1905, when it was replaced by the new and current Hospital General de México.

In the church attached to the Hospital de San Andrés, Dr Agustín Andrade performed the second embalming procedure on the body of Maximilian of Hapsburg. Afterwards, the site was converted into a "sanctuary" and then a meeting place for supporters of the Second Mexican Empire. President Benito Juárez and his cabinet had the church demolished in a single night and the lot remained empty. Years later a building to host the first institution dedicated to ophthalmology was built, which remains to this day. It opened its doors to care for patients on 15 May 1876, first called the Fundación Valdivieso, then, from 1898, the Hospital de Nuestra Señora de la Luz. Today, the Xicoténcatl street runs past there, flanked by the former building of the Senate of the Republic and the National Museum of Art, which occupies what was the Palace of Communications building built during the Porfiriato as part of the Centennial commemoration plan and which replaced the former San Andrés building.¹⁰

Don Ignacio Valdivieso y Vidal de Lorca (1805-1861), the fifth count of San Pedro del Álamo (Fig. 1), who was the Minister Plenipotentiary of Mexico to the courts of Rome and Madrid, stipulated in his will that a monthly income of 7,900



Figure 1 Ignacio Valdivieso y Vidal de Lorca.

Francis was to be left to establish a hospital for the poor in Mexico. The executor of his will, Francisco Allsop, decided that it would be a hospital for poor patients with eye diseases. It is likely that he knew that there were hospitals dedicated to eye disease patients in London, Saint Petersburg and Philadelphia.¹¹

Having begun operations in 1876, the Fundación Valdivieso was the second eye hospital established on the continent, after the Wills Eye Hospital of Philadelphia inaugurated in 1832, the first in Latin America, and certainly the first in Mexico. It rivals the Hospital Nacional Oftalmológico Santa Lucía, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in age, also dedicated to eye conditions since the 19th century, when it arose by decree in 1823 and began functioning until 1878, as can be seen on the institution's website.¹²

The first director of the Fundación Valdivieso was Dr Agustín Andrade, the same person who directed Maximilian's embalming in the San Andrés church. Upon his death in 1886, he was succeeded by Dr Ricardo Vértiz Berruecos, who gave the institution a strong boost, such that the installed capacity was insufficient to care for the patients who came. Thus, Dr Vértiz, with his own money and donations, acquired property on La Paz street and began constructing a building for an eye hospital. He died in 1898 before it was finished. The executor of his will, Félix Cuevas, finished the building with his own contributions.¹³

As of 1891, Rafael Dondé presided over the Fundación Valdivieso's board of trustees in place of Mr Allsop. He and Mr Cuevas decided to merge the two foundations, since it would reinforce their activities in their common fight against blindness. Around that time, a woman donated an oil painting of Nuestra Señora de la Luz (Fig. 2), attributed to Miguel Cabrera (Oaxaca 1695-Mexico City 1768)¹⁴ and it was from that

Marian devotion that the new institution took its name. In 1898, the patients, doctors, staff and equipment moved from the old facility to the new one, already called the Hospital de Nuestra Señora de la Luz, located on La Paz street, now Ezequiel Montes, number 135.

When Dr Ricard Vértiz Berruecos died, he was replaced on the board by his brother Joaquín until the year 1898. The new hospital's first director was Dr Lorenzo Chávez, who managed the hospital until 1912.⁵ I leave the story of the Hospital's directors and distinguished physicians in the 19th century. The building from 1898 (Fig. 3) was replaced one century later by a functional, modern building, well equipped with the latest technological advances.

The Fundación Valdivieso or the Hospital de la Luz, as it is generally known, is the cradle of ophthalmology in Mexico

and a benchmark in the national history of the specialty. The first Mexican ophthalmologists were trained there, in the Instituto Valdivieso, including Agustín Chacón, Federico Ábrego, José María Ramos, the Ricardo brothers and Joaquín Vértiz Berruecos. Years later, Dr José María Ramos would become the first president of the current Mexican Society of Ophthalmology (1892). Among Dr Ricardo Vértiz Berruecos' disciples include well known ophthalmologists such as doctors José María Gama, Emilio Montañón, Manuel Uribe y Troncoso, José de Jesús González, Fernando López, Daniel Vélez, Ignacio Bustamante, Lorenzo Chávez and Enrique Graue Glennie.¹³

On the "Record of Establishment" of the Ophthalmological Society, now the Mexican Society of Ophthalmology, on 18 February 1893, doctors Federico Ábrego, Agustín Chacón, Fernando López, Emilio Montañón, José Ramos, Manuel Uribe, Joaquín Vértiz and Lorenzo Chávez (sic), all doctors at the Hospital de la Luz, appear as founders at the house of Dr José Ramos. There, Dr Manuel Carmona y Valle founded the first school of ophthalmology in Mexico in 1887.¹⁵ Dr Manuel Uribe y Troncoso, a founder of the Mexican Society Ophthalmology, entered the Hospital de la Luz in 1899. The previous year, in 1898, together with Dr Daniel Vélez (also a doctor at the hospital) he founded the *Anales de Oftalmología* [Annals of Ophthalmology], today the REVISTA MEXICANA DE OFTALMOLOGÍA [MEXICAN JOURNAL OF OPHTHALMOLOGY]. In 1903, after having done a tour of Europe and the United States commissioned by the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts to learn about centres of ophthalmological instruction, Dr Rafael Silva—who entered the Hospital de la Luz in 1906—was appointed professor of Ophthalmology Practice at the Faculty of Advanced Studies in 1912 by the Dean and the Central Board of Professors, but it was not possible to start the classes at the Hospital until 1916, continuing in 1920, 1921 and 1922.¹⁵ The graduates had the title "Academic Professor of Ophthalmology". Since 1973, the Faculty of Medicine Division of Postgraduate Studies and Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico has recognised the specialty studies given at the Hospital.

From 27 to 31 March 1903, the Hospital organised the "First National Meeting of Ophthalmology", which in reality should have been named the first Mexican congress in the specialty, as stated in the opening address by Dr Carmona y Valle, the then Director of the Faculty of Medicine. Nine works by members of the Ophthalmological Society residing in Mexico City were presented, six by members from the other states, and two by foreign physicians (United States and El Salvador). Fifty-nine members attended the second meeting in 1905, also at the Hospital.¹⁶ The Mexican Society of Ophthalmology held its regular sessions at the Hospital until the 1930s.

As a result of the Fundación Valdivieso leaving the building attached to the Hospital de San Andrés, since 1898 eye patients have been cared for in the Hospital itself, which inherited the current Ophthalmology Department from the Hospital General de México Eduardo Liceaga. It is possible that the Ophthalmology Department of the Military Hospital also started operation in the 19th century, founded by its director Dr Fernando López, who in 1905 was the first director of the Hospital General de México.¹⁷ Likewise, eye patients must have been cared for in the other hospitals of the Republic, as they are today.



Figure 2 Nuestra Señora de la Luz.



Figure 3 Original building of the Hospital de la Luz. 1898.

Although already created in the 20th century, a history of the ophthalmology institutions in Mexico is not complete without mentioning, albeit briefly, the current Asociación para Evitar la Ceguera en México [Association for the Prevention of Blindness in Mexico] (Hospital Luis Sánchez Bulnes), founded on 13 August 1918 in the city of Puebla under the name “Junta para la Prevención de la Ceguera en México” [Committee for the Prevention of Blindness in Mexico] by Dr José Terrés and a group of philanthropists,¹⁸ and the Institute of Ophthalmology, which was inaugurated on 24 February 1976, an offshoot of the Fundación Conde de Valenciana created thanks to the inheritance left by Luis Ludert y Rul who wanted it to have that name in memory of his ancestors.

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