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The look of the portuguese periodical press on diseases and epidemics in Portugal in the first decades of the 20th century¹

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Abstract: The occurrence of epidemics accompanied man throughout history. There were several causes that contributed to the various outbreaks, namely, the lack of cleaning and hygiene care of the body, homes and public spaces, among others. The epidemic scourge worsened above all during the 19th century, which contributed to the development of transport, which facilitated the movement of people, goods, but also of diseases. It was during the 19th century that the periodical press, despite the high levels of illiteracy of the Portuguese population, played a fundamental role in disseminating information and raising awareness about the care to be taken in the fields of public and private health and hygiene. Our work essentially focuses on the analysis of news, opinion articles and advertisements published in the Portuguese press, about the different epidemic outbreaks that affected Portugal in the first decades of the 20th century. Based on the data collected, we intend to identify the most debated matters in the health area, namely those related to forms of treatment and prevention, as well as the changes that the emergence of diseases caused in the health and hygiene of public spaces.

Key words: Diseases, Epidemics, Health history, 20th Century, Press.

La mirada de la prensa periódica portuguesa sobre las enfermedades y epidemias en Portugal en las primeras décadas del siglo XX

Resumen: La aparición de epidemias ha acompañado a la humanidad a lo largo de la historia. Varias causas han contribuido a los diversos brotes, como la falta de limpieza e higiene del cuerpo, de los hogares y de los espacios públicos, entre otras. El azote de las epidemias se agravó especialmente durante el siglo XIX, a lo que contribuyó el desarrollo del transporte, que facilitó la circulación de personas, mercancías, pero también de enfermedades. Fue durante el siglo XIX cuando la prensa periódica, a pesar de los altos niveles de analfabetismo de la población portuguesa, desempeñó un papel fundamental en la difusión de información y en la concienciación sobre las precauciones que debían tomarse en los ámbitos de la salud y la higiene públicas y privadas. Nuestro trabajo se centra esencialmente en el análisis de noticias, artículos de opinión y anuncios publicados en la prensa portuguesa sobre los diferentes brotes epidémicos que afectaron a Portugal en las primeras décadas del siglo XX. A partir de los datos recogidos, pretendemos identificar las cuestiones más debatidas en el ámbito sanitario, en particular las relacionadas con las formas de tratamiento y prevención, así como los cambios que la aparición de enfermedades provocó en la salubridad e higiene de los espacios públicos.

Palabras clave: Enfermedades, Epidemias, Historia de la Salud, Siglo XX, Prensa.

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O olhar da imprensa periódica portuguesa sobre as doenças e epidemias em Portugal nas primeiras décadas do século XX

Resumo: A ocorrência de epidemias acompanhou o Homem ao longo da História. Foram várias as causas que contribuíram para os diversos surtos, nomeadamente, a falta de cuidados de limpeza e higiene do corpo, das habitações e dos espaços públicos, entre outros. O flagelo epidémico agravou-se sobretudo durante o século XIX, que contribuiu para o desenvolvimento dos transportes, o que facilitou a circulação de pessoas, bens, mas também de doenças. Foi durante o século XIX que a imprensa periódica, apesar dos elevados níveis de analfabetismo da população portuguesa, desempenhou um papel fundamental na divulgação de informação e sensibilização para os cuidados a ter nos domínios da saúde e higiene pública e privada. O nosso trabalho incide essencialmente na análise de notícias, artigos de opinião e anúncios publicados na imprensa portuguesa, sobre os diferentes surtos epidémicos que afetaram Portugal nas primeiras décadas do século XX. Com base nos dados recolhidos, pretendemos identificar os assuntos mais debatidos na área da saúde, nomeadamente os relacionados com as formas de tratamento e prevenção, bem como as alterações que o aparecimento de doenças provocou na salubridade e higiene dos espaços públicos.

Palavras-chave: Doenças, Epidemias, História da Saúde, Século XX, Imprensa.

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Epidemics have accompanied and tormented mankind ever since the beginning of times. Several and varied initiatives have been adopted over time, with the aim of preventing and controlling diseases, whilst fully testing the resilience and resourcefulness of Man (SNOWDEN, 2020; COHN, 2018). Discoveries and progresses made across a number of fields, namely medicine, have not always been able to prevent the emergence of new infectious diseases, nor eradicate some of the old ones. Only when medicine was revolutionized in the course of the 20th century have answers become more efficient, but this century still witnessed the persistence of a trend coming from the 19th century and referring to the globalization of diseases. This is a process that makes illnesses spread faster and reach farther locations, very similar to the circumstances with goods and people, thus making them harder to delimit within certain niches.

In the eighteen-hundreds, the periodical press became a standard feature within society. Newspapers multiplied and in addition to their informative function, they also started making statements on different topics, namely health care, diseases and epidemics. In Portugal, these matters were dealt with in detail by the 19th century press and the press in the first three decades of the 20th century. Local newspapers reported on the diseases that plagued their local populations, while reporting what was happening at a regional, national and even international levels. (ALMEIDA, 2013). The same was happening with national newspapers; they covered topics in either the capital or the country and also across borders.

In the event of a health crisis, newspapers sought to report on what responses were adopted for a particular healthcare area, detailing the situation in hospitals, especially when it came to the difficulties faced, the number of patients admitted, the building works carried out, and what doctors were being distinguished in their field. Public figures known for their philanthropy were also newsworthy, and their actions deserved special attention. (ESTEVES, 2019). However, periodicals

did not always fulfil their function properly, and the reporting of misinformation or information coming from unreliable sources was common, thus putting their credibility in check and hindering the ability of authorities to fight epidemics. (ESTEVES; PINTO, 2020).

Always attentive to the everyday reality, newspapers also displayed an acute critical stand. For example, they reported the unsanitary conditions existing in certain populational centres, as well as the lack of planning in safeguarding public hygiene. In this regard, it can be said that the press played a key pedagogical role in alerting the communities in terms of what they should be doing with their personal hygiene, and how to look after their homes, in addition to listing a set of sanitary rules that should be followed during regular times, but mainly in epidemic outbreaks. Notwithstanding, newspapers did not always follow similar guidelines when it came to the measures adopted, or to the actions undertaken by health and administrative authorities. They often pointed out weaknesses and denounced insufficiencies or negligent attitudes.

There were plenty of newspapers in Portugal. Despite the occasional censorship, freedom of press was the norm, and until the establishment of the Estado Novo dictatorship, newspapers conveyed critical opinions. Opinion pieces openly criticized the processes employed to fight epidemics, and the subsequent measures adopted that failed to have the intended outcome when handling endemic diseases. They also performed an excellent platform to disseminate, and even promote, charitable initiatives, such as public subscriptions favouring the sick. These would be carried out by institutions as *Misericórdias*, philanthropic agents or private individuals. During epidemic times, the press was filled with advertising and graphic images of home remedies, treatments, medicines and wider medicinal substances. On these occasions, obituary columns were also given more space.

Newspapers are sources of research of undeniable relevance to the study of contemporary history, as a result of their wealth of information. However, the press must be analyzed critically, taking into account, among other variables, its production context. As a result of the opinionated nature that is often associated with news content, the newspaper must be interpreted by the historian in a comparative way, based on other periodicals from the same time period or other sources, making it possible to identify political, economic and social conditioning factors (VIEIRA, 2013; ALLEN & SIECZKIEWICZ, 2010).

In the study under analysis, the role of the press in disseminating and covering health problems was analysed, and covered a total of 2461 news published between July 1910 and December 1935 in two periodicals of national circulation: *Diário de Notícias* and *A Capital*. If, on the one hand, the newspaper *Diário de Notícias*, published since 1865, promoted itself as neutral in its defense of political ideals, with the main objective of publishing informative news and educating

the population, on the other hand, the newspaper *A Capital*, whose publication lasted from 1868 to 1938, defended republican policies and called itself "Diário Republicano da Noite" (Republican Evening Journal") (TENGARRINHA, 1965). We believe that the antagonism between political neutrality and the defense of republican ideals is an added value in our study, as it allows us to identify continuities or ruptures in terms of how the news content was selected and displayed and also in terms of the frequency of publication of the topics under study.

In addition, the selection of the newspapers *Diário de Notícias* and *A Capital* is justified by the long period of publication of both, which facilitated news monitoring of the topics under study, as well as the daily publication, which allowed us to understand in greater detail the concern in disseminating information about epidemiological outbreaks, and their prophylaxis and treatment. In fact, there is a direct link between the national press and the political changes that took place during the period under study.

If we focus our attention on the political history of the country, this was an era that covered four main periods: the end of the Constitutional Monarchy; the Republic; the Military Dictatorship; and the Estado Novo dictatorship².

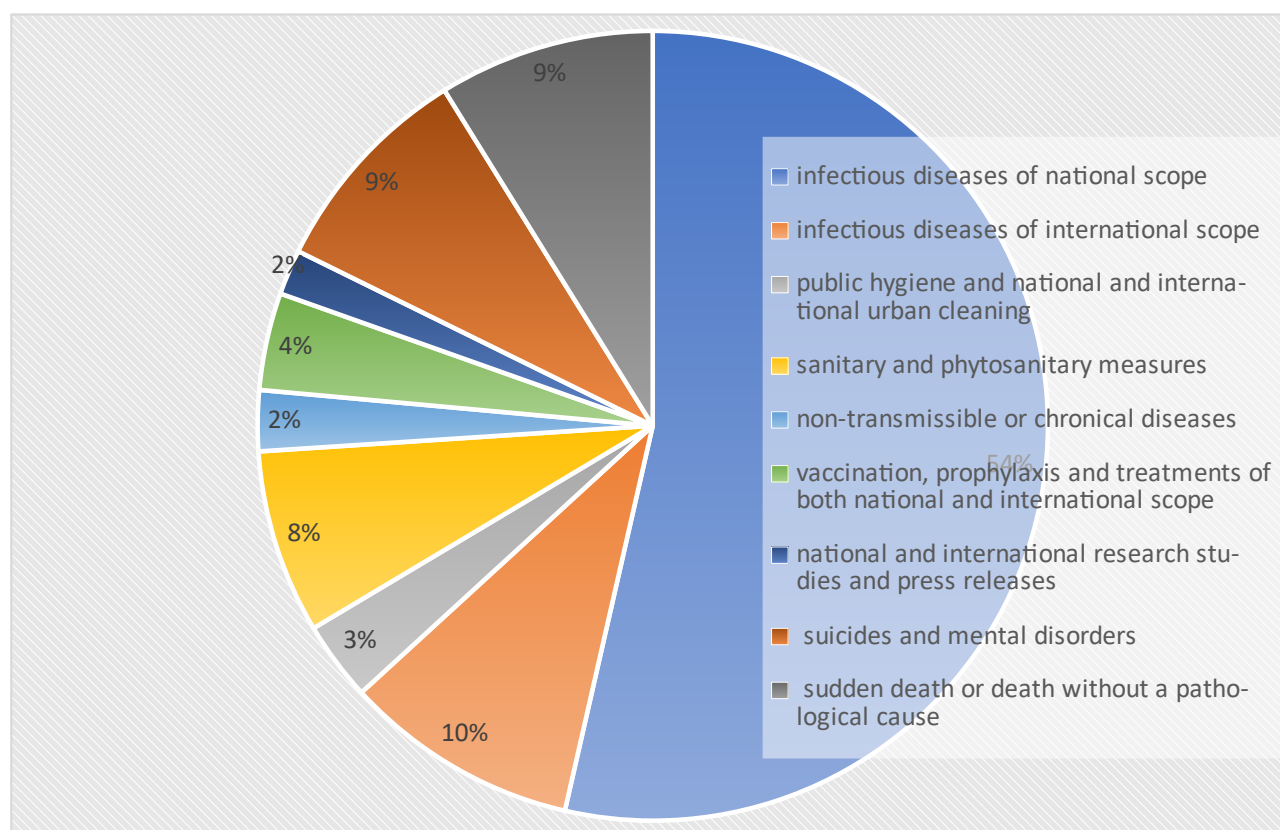
1. Epidemics and public health between 1910-1935: a view through the periodical press

It should be noted that the political agenda had an impact on how health was perceived and how information on both diseases and epidemics was being handled. For a better understanding on the role of newspapers as disseminators of news on public health, we organized different categories designed to establish criteria for classifying news. The categories created were as follows: infectious diseases of national scope; infectious diseases of international scope; public hygiene and urban cleaning; sanitary and phytosanitary measures; non-transmissible or chronic diseases; vaccination, prophylaxis and treatments; research studies and press releases; suicides and mental disorders; sudden death or death without a pathological cause.

² The contemporary period in Portugal was marked by political instability, articulated by the succession of political regimes guided by different ideals. The Portuguese Constitutional Monarchy was installed by revolution in 1820 and lasted until 1910. This political system was characterized by the affirmation of liberal ideals supported by the drafting of a Constitution (1822) and Constitutional Charter (1826), which separated the legislative, executive and judicial powers, elements that until then had been covered by the figure of the King and his Court. The political and economic instability felt in the last decades of the 19th century culminated in 1908 with the regicide of King Carlos and his heir, Prince Luís Filipe, and opened the door to the implementation of the First Republic on October 5, 1910. In addition to the exaltation of nationalism and anti-clericalism, parliamentary and governmental instability, which worsened with Portugal's participation in World War I, defined the republican period, which came to an end with the military coup led by General Gomes da Costa on May 28, 1926. On this date, the period of the Military Dictatorship was established, inviting António de Oliveira Salazar to become Finance Minister, and as a result of the financial stability obtained and the progressive domination of the political apparatus, it resulted in the establishment of the dictatorial regime known as the Estado Novo, which lasted from 1933 to 1974 (MATTOSO, 1994, 1998; SERRÃO, 1990; PEREIRA, 1994).

Chart 1

Categories of health news published in Portuguese newspapers (1910-1935)



Source: *Diário de Notícias* (1910-1935); *A Capital* (1910-1935).

As per the analysis of Chart 1, newspapers focused their attention on infectious diseases, particularly those that impacted the national territory and frightened the population the most. These fears were evident in the way the disease was perceived, despite the advances made in the medical field. People took refuge in the divine and the supernatural, and understood illnesses as some sort of punishment for the sins committed by Man³. During epidemic times, masses were commissioned, promises were made and processions were organized, in the hope that evil and death would be ward off.

The perception of danger and the way diseases were viewed also differed, and the press much contributed to this “differential understanding”. In turn, this had implications in the reactions generated: some diseases were seen as being common sicknesses, while others, such as cholera or the bubonic plague, caused fear (ROSENBERG, 1987). This distinction was also connected to the

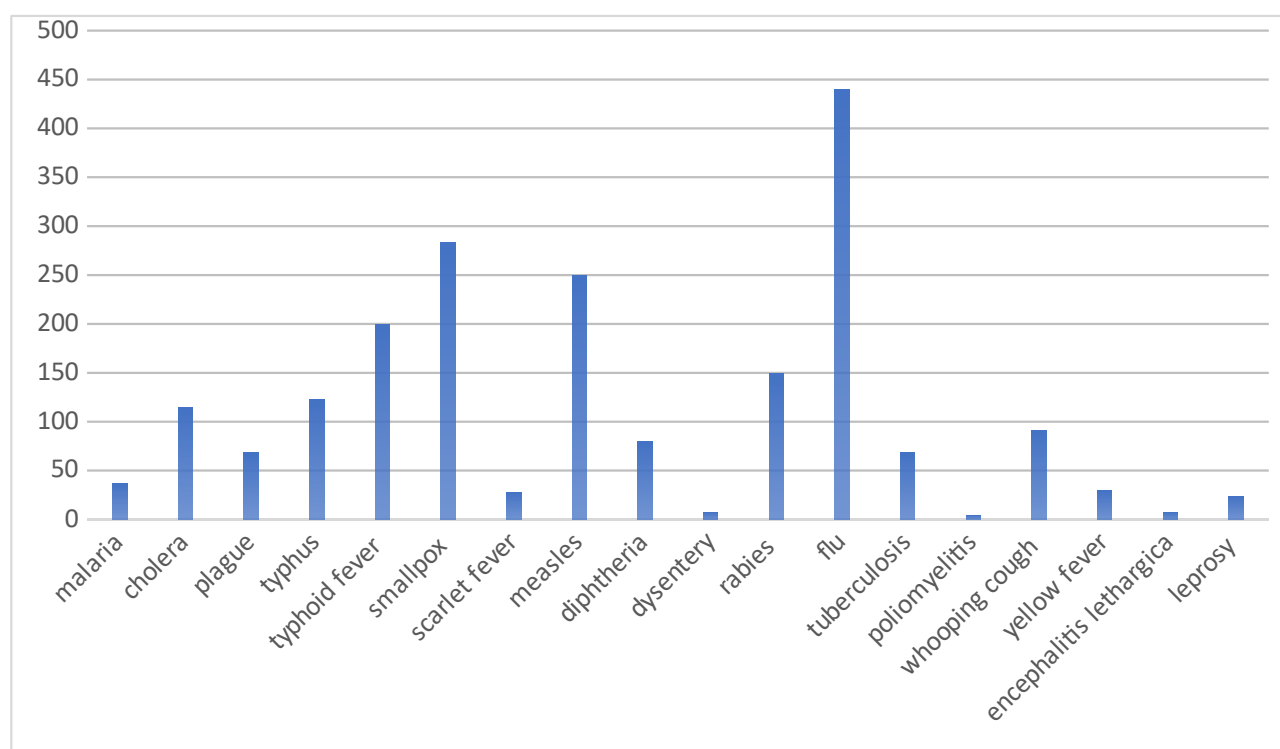
³ Despite the secularization attempted by the political regime of the First Republic (1910-1926), even at the beginning of the 20th century, there were many demonstrations of faith associated with periods of famine, war or epidemics. The periodical press made this known by reporting on penance processions during epidemic outbreaks of cholera, smallpox and Spanish flu, among others between the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. The refuge to the divine demonstrates the population's resistance to the prevention and treatment of diseases by medical means and the strong presence of religion in their daily lives.

characteristics of each disease, in particular their symptomatology and the after-effects they caused (SNOWDEN 2020). The case of cholera was paradigmatic, as its manifestations were sudden and affected people could not control or hide some of its symptoms (e.g. vomiting). The way cholera was viewed clearly contrasted with tuberculosis. The pale air and the lost gaze of those who were ill served as inspiration for both literary and artistic works. This nuisance, which was not something to look out for, consumed the bodies of the poorest and most undernourished people (FRITH, 2008); and the press, similarly to literature and painting, much contributed to the widespread of a certain imagery built around diseases and epidemics.

The most prominent pathologies featured in the press were not always the most serious when it came to their level of incidence and mortality.

Chart 2

Pathologies reported by Portuguese newspapers (1910-1935)



Source: *Diário de Notícias*; *A Capital*.

The most publicized diseases were those that affected the populations the most, as for example the seasonal flu. Despite the importance given to pneumonic or the Spanish flu, which was fully justified by its impact on health, the fact was that every year different national regions were affected by flu outbreaks, which, in addition to causing a considerable number of deaths, especially during the winter, also highlighted the shortcomings of care services (SOBRAL & LIMA, 2018;

SILVA, 2019; SOBRAL, 2020)⁴. In February 1927, the Directorate-General of Health reported a flu wave in the city of Lisbon, which took the lives of 350 people in one week only. Due to the lack of human resources, hospitals were closing and leaving the population to their own care, which certainly contributed to an increase in the number of deaths, given that it was a highly contagious illness. Moreover, newspapers were filled with news reporting on the shortage of medical doctors, and the struggles affecting hospitals and undermining the provision of health care to the sick. They also reported on the confinement of some villages, due to the lack of transport routes or the existence of impenetrable roads⁵.

How to explain the little relevance given to the flu, a disease that usually left a trail of death in its wake? On the one hand, the justification may lie in the recurrence of the disease, especially during the winter months; on the other hand, and as a rule, the disease plagued the oldest and the most fragile people, unlike the Spanish flu (GEORGE, 2014). Nevertheless, the flu was not the disease that killed the most people in Portugal. One of the biggest public health problems the country faced, and a cause of great concern, was tuberculosis, which reached a high incidence and lethality levels in the first decades of the 20th century (VIEIRA, 2016). If we look into the year of 1927 and use the data on the deaths recorded in a hospital context, tuberculosis was the main cause of death: 1103 deaths, while other epidemic diseases were only responsible for 388⁶.

After the flu, and as seen in Chart 2, the most reported diseases were smallpox and measles, which mainly affected children, as well as whooping cough, diphtheria and scarlet fever.

Smallpox was still very much a reality in Portugal in the first three decades of the 20th century. The situation was particularly serious in the years when it coincided with other epidemics, such as typhus or the Spanish flu (ALMEIDA, 2014). In some places, there was even the need to establish sanitary cordons to control and prevent its spread. Its permanence was largely due to the distrust and resistance of people towards vaccination. Many families even went as far as to cover up the illness and disregard medical care.

1.1 Epidemics and the children: the importance of vaccination

In the summer of 1910, there was an outbreak of smallpox in Lisbon, which mainly affected the poorest neighbourhoods, and children under five were the main victims. The authorities considered that the difficulty in fighting this disease was fundamentally due to its concealment, so

4 Regarding the number of deaths caused by the flu and the consequent impact the disease had on the national press, Fernando da Silva Correia reports the seriousness of the situation in figures. According to the author, the number of deaths fluctuated from 780 in 1916 to 2343 in 1920. The disease reached its mortality peak in 1918 with 55,780 cases, and this number fell the following year to 3057 (SILVA CORREIA, 1938).

5 *Diário de Notícias*, 9th of February 1929.

6 *Anuário estatístico de Portugal 1927. Assistência*, p. 71.

the High Council of Hygiene insisted on carrying out home visits⁷. The police force ended up receiving orders to attend to an infected person's house as soon as they became aware of a case, in order to verify the existence of more cases. The Red Cross also played an active role on the field, and was responsible for distributing free vaccination to the neediest population.

As a response to outbreaks, mandatory vaccination became a reality. In the 1930s, public sessions were organized weekly for vaccination and revaccination against smallpox, and involved hundreds of people. At the same time, information and awareness campaigns were promoted in social hygiene dispensaries and in other fixed or mobile posts supervised by the Directorate-General of Health. Moreover, in October 1935, and regarding an epidemic wave that raged in Penamacor, it was announced that many parents had prevented their children from being vaccinated.

Despite reports of measles epidemics in earlier historical times, the disease continued to rage in the 20th century, affecting mainly children, although it did not spare adults either. Its persistence in Portugal and rapid spread were due, at least in part, to the ignorance and irresponsibility of parents, who trusted fate or the miraculous effect of homemade remedies, instead of seeking out medical assistance, which was, however, not always within reach. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, measles outbreaks occurred in several regions of the country, and similar situations happened in other countries, such as Spain in 1928. This disease worried the Portuguese health authorities due to its high incidence level, and among the main mechanisms to control it were the temporary closure of schools, similar to the procedures adopted in Spain. In July 1935, and regarding an epidemic outbreak affecting Braga, a connection was made between the high number of fatal cases and the diagnosis of bronchopneumonia or meningitis⁸.

There were several infectious diseases reported in the news that mainly affected children, such as smallpox and measles, although they also affected adults. With a lower incidence level, but equally problematic, diphtheria, whooping cough, also known as pertussis, and scarlet fever all featured the pages of the 19th century newspapers, and continued to be the object of news in the first 35 years of the 20th century.

The Câmara Pestana Bacteriological Institute stood out in the fight against diphtheria in Portugal. Founded in 1892, this institution was primarily concerned with treating cases of rabies, but administered a serum to treat diphtheria since 1895⁹. At the beginning of the 20th century, the

⁷ *Diário de Notícias*, 26th of July 1910.

⁸ *Diário de Notícias*, July 1935.

⁹ The development of scientific areas such as microbiology and bacteriology resulted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in the creation of research institutes in the field of public health and hygiene, which followed the format of the Pasteur Institute in Paris. In addition to the medical-scientific research into diphtheria and anti-rabies vaccination, the Câmara Pestana Institute developed other services such as health care and the development of academic teaching in the area. The medical-scientific research carried out by the Institute was shaped by the country's economic and political context, and so it took new directions, with scientific practices relating to the identification of causal agents of

Institute contribution to the decrease of lethality levels was recognized; however, the big discoveries in its fight only came in the 20th century, especially when the vaccine was discovered in 1923. In 1927, the disease still took the lives of some children in Moita, a village in the municipality of Setúbal. In November 1931, the country was affected again by a new wave of diphtheria, one that practically exhausted the capacity of the wards at the Câmara Pestana Bacteriological Institute.

Scarlet fever was an infrequent disease until the 17th century, and for a long time, doctors struggled to distinguish between scarlet fever, diphtheria and measles. From the 19th century onwards, outbreaks became more frequent and deadlier, possibly as a result of a bacterial mutation. One of best-known victims to the disease was the grandson of John D. Rockefeller, an American tycoon and philanthropist. Already in the 20th century, a milder version of the disease emerged (HEMPEL, 2020), and when assessing the infectious diseases' framework afflicting Portugal in the second half of 1927, scarlet fever emerged as one of the deadliest.

1.2 Typhoid fever

At the beginning of the 20th century, typhoid fever continued to be on the public health problems' list. In Portugal, its occurrence was related to the consumption of polluted water collected from wells, springs, fountains, and associated with the non-existent or deficient public water supply system in most places, including in several towns and cities. An attempt was made to raise awareness amongst the population, particularly within the younger generations, about what type of precautions to be adopted when it came to water consumption. In 1927, instructions were given to the Educational Health branch so that schools were to be rigged with equipment destined to boil water intended for consumption. At the same time, primary school teachers ought to alert students and consequently parents about the dangers of drinking contaminated water¹⁰. The Directorate-General of Health recommended some preventive measures, such as the consumption of boiled water and milk; the washing of raw food with boiled water; the use of boiled water for ablutions and creolin water for hand washing; going to the doctor as soon as the first symptoms appeared; and quickly hospitalizing the infected to prevent the spread of the disease¹¹. After all, these were epidemic outbreaks that lingered over time, as for example the in Moita in 1933, where an epidemic of typhoid fever raged for four months, and caused a high level of hospitalizations and

epidemiological diseases standing out, as well as case studies of illnesses such as cholera and sleeping sickness, which enabled the internationalization of scientific work produced in Portugal in the field of microbiology (MARQUES, 2020).

10 *Diário de Notícias*, 27th October 1927.

11 *Diário de Notícias*, 6th December 1928.

deaths¹².

In the 20th century, more precisely in the 1940s, Portugal failed to present riveting data in its fight against the disease and especially when compared to other European countries. The lack of medical assistance was by far one of the most serious challenges. In November 1934, Soajo, a parish in the municipality of Arcos de Valdevez in the northern country, witnessed a very intense epidemic, and one that caused several deaths. Soajo was an isolated village of humble people and few resources, and the community could not afford medical care. The Local Authority used to send a municipal doctor to assist the community on a quarterly basis; however, this service, despite being sporadic, was eventually suspended and the population deprived from any clinical support.

In the specific case of the capital, the Directorate-General of Health pointed towards a decrease in typhoid fever cases in the 1920s, after the waves that took place in the previous decade. However, there was another outbreak in December 1928, and the measures adopted by the authorities focused on purifying the water that supplied the city.

1.3 Rabies and animal health care

News about rabies was also very frequent, although this was a disease that had been inflicting Portugal for a very long time. The high number of cases, almost always resulting from canine attacks, ended up stimulating the development of veterinary medicine in the first decades of the 20th century. This, in turn, led to a greater control of the animals. Victims of attacks by rabid animals were transported to the Câmara Pestana Bacteriological Institute in Lisbon, and those confirmed to be infected were taken to the Rego Hospital, where they would be isolated until death came. Between 1893 and 1912, 17,332 people were treated at the Institute, 66 of whom died¹³. Whenever possible, animals were killed and their heads sent to Lisbon for examination. The transportation of the poorest people was financed by the respective municipalities. Meanwhile, more institutions emerged in Porto and Coimbra, and anti-rabies dispensaries were created in several locations. In 1949, there were 42 establishments in Portugal for this purpose alone.

Newspapers listed some of the preventive measures undertaken by several municipalities to end animal attacks. For example, in 1927 Cascais established the necessity of dogs wearing a collar and a muzzle by municipal decree, alongside the obligation of owners to pay a fee. However, the population in some localities rebelled against the extermination of animals with poisoned cake, “*since it represented an inhumane procedure*”¹⁴. In May 1940, by Decree-Law nº 29 441 of 11-2-

12 *Diário de Notícias*, 14th May 1933.

13 *A Capital*, 13th of March 1913.

14 *Diário de Notícias*, 13th of July 1927.

39, vaccination against rabies became mandatory; and by Decree-Law nº 11 242, of 16-11-25, the vaccination of all canids over four months of age became compulsory.

1.4 Cholera and the sanitary cordons

Cholera continued to be the subject of news in Portuguese newspapers in the early 20th century (PITA, 2018; ABREU, 2018). In 1910, there was information reporting its presence in several European countries, and to prevent its entry into Portugal, a sanitary cordon was installed in Vilar Formoso, and disinfection materials were acquired for the ports of both Lisbon and Porto. Faced with the spread of cholera across Europe, the country took some precautions: it prepared the use of an extraordinary credit to finance measures meant to control it; two pavilions at Rego Hospital were prepared to house the sick; and vessels entering Portuguese ports were required to quarantine. Cholera failed to reach mainland Portugal, but reached Madeira. To fight it, temporary hospitals were set up and soldiers were sent from the Continent. Among other activities, they would help with the establishment of sanitary cordons and with the identification of new cases. At the same time, the side effects of the epidemic began to emerge: the high number of orphaned children forced the establishment of public subscriptions and the creation of asylums destined to house them. In late January 1911, the press reported the end of the cholera outbreak in Madeira and Porto Santo.

1.5 Exanthematous typhus

The number of references to cholera was not so much related with its impact on the national territory during the period under analysis, but mainly associated with the fear the disease caused in the popular imagination. The same was not true of typhus. Its presence on newspapers referred to cases that actually occurred in the Portuguese territory and that, to a certain extent, did some justice to the expression used by Ricardo Jorge when defining Portugal as a “typhus country”, given the outspread of the disease (JORGE, 1918). Typhus had been in Portugal since the 15th century, and had long been associated with the lack of hygiene and poor living standards, in addition to adverse conditions, as for example wars, or cereal and food crises. It was often identified in unsanitary areas, such as prisons, and over the centuries, several names were given to it. More often than not, typhus was misinterpreted for typhoid fever (HAYAS, 2009; HARDY, 2011).

Outbreaks of exanthematous typhus were common in several Portuguese regions and locations. In 1914, there was an epidemic in Castro Laboreiro, a town in northern Portugal that required the intervention of the Red Cross and the setting up of a temporary hospital. At the end of 1917, it was Porto's turn to be affected by an epidemic wave that remained throughout the first months of the following year. It ended up spreading to the neighbouring municipalities. To contain

the epidemic, especially the fight against lice, several measures were adopted for the city: the creation of bathing areas; home disinfections; the control of suspected infections; the division of the city into 14 areas coinciding with existing police posts; the creation of a delousing station; the setting up a delousing hospital at the São Jerónimo asylum; and the control of people's movement, especially the beggars¹⁵. Despite these precautions, the epidemic continued to spread violently in February 1918; and by this time, the virus had already scattered throughout the country and reached the capital. The press considered one of the reasons behind the lack of control over the disease to be the inefficient supervision of passengers coming from Porto, who continued to move freely and disseminate the epidemic¹⁶.

In May that year, the illness was still active across several regions of Portugal. It is worth remembering that it is precisely in that month that the Spanish flu appeared in Portugal; it came with seasonal workers returning from Spain. Under these circumstances, several localities had to face epidemics on two fronts, and even three, as in some parts of the national territory an outbreak of smallpox was also active. Only in September 1918, the typhus epidemic was considered to be over in the city of Porto, at a time when the country was entering the second wave of the Spanish flu, the most violent and deadly, and which had its starting point in the military barracks of Vila Nova de Gaia (ALMEIDA, 2012). Still, in the spring of the following year, Porto ended up recording over a hundred cases of exanthematous typhus¹⁷. According to the press, Braga also presented an alarming situation and the matter became a discussion topic in the House of Representatives¹⁸.

One of the most prominent outbreaks that the press reported was in Loriga, in 1927. Initially, the medical authorities struggled with identifying the disease which, in early May that year, had already affected 80 people. After confirming the exanthematic typhus diagnosis, medical and nursing staff had to be reinforced; the school and church were closed; funds were made available to help those affected; and a defence plan was organized to include the installation of a temporary hospital and a bathhouse. Its spread towards other regions via agricultural workers who seasonally moved around that region was greatly feared¹⁹. The solution turned out to be the establishment of a sanitary fence around the village, but despite the efforts, the epidemic continued. On the 21st of May, the deaths of the municipal doctor and the sub-inspector for health were reported. They had been both involved in the fight against typhus²⁰. The next day, another clinician

15 *Diário de Notícias*, 20th February 1918.

16 *A Capital*, 5th of May 1918.

17 *A Capital*, 5th of April 1919.

18 *A Capital*, 18th July 1919.

19 *Diário de Notícias*, 15th May 1927.

20 *Diário de Notícias*, 21st May 1927.

died and the epidemic reached the region border²¹. Five days later, front page news announced the existence of typhus cases in Lisbon, some of which originated in Loriga. By mid-June, the epidemic seemed finally under control²².

Two years later, in June 1929, a new epidemic outbreak was reported, but this time in Vagos. To fight it, bathhouses were installed both in Vagos and Ílhavo; home visits were organised; markets were inspected; and fairs were banned²³. Similarly, typhus killed the sub-inspector for health in this locality.

In 1933, in Ervedal da Beira, a parish in the municipality of Oliveira do Hospital, a typhus epidemic of serious proportions was raging and causing a considerable number of victims, although *Diário de Notícias* failed to provide an exact number²⁴. Similar to other epidemics, the disease continued to be seen as a punishment and the population turned to religion in an attempt to placate divine wrath. Saint Sebastian was the most summoned saint, and the one people prayed to ward off pestiferous threats.

In 1934, and given the existence of several cases of typhus in Olhão, three public bathhouses were opened and the victims' houses were disinfected, alongside the streets where they were located. An attempt was also made to supervise the cleaning of boats leaving the village port, and the cleaning of public spaces was also reinforced²⁵. Meanwhile, and to avoid the agglomeration of people, cinemas were closed, recreational associations ceased to function and balls were prohibited.

1.6 Bubonic Plague

The number of news on the plague was also considerable, as per Chart 2. Similar to cholera, information about this disease also focused more on what was happening abroad and the possibility of it entering the national territory via vessels coming from ports considered to be “dirty”. The warnings about the presence of the disease in Las Palmas in July 1928, and in October that the same year in Tenerife were perfect examples of this²⁶. There were also fears with regards to the colonies. In August 1920, *Diário de Notícias* reported that the Colonial Secretary had given orders to grant requests coming from the governor of Guinea regarding the measures meant to safeguard the province from the bubonic plague, which was already raging the French Guinea²⁷.

The third major plague outbreak began in the 1850s and lasted until the 1960s (CHASE,

21 *Diário de Notícias*, 22nd May 1927.

22 *Diário de Notícias*, 14th June 1927.

23 *Diário de Notícias* 16th June 1929.

24 *Diário de Notícias*, 21st October 1933.

25 *Diário de Notícias*, 1st June 1934.

26 *Diário de Notícias*, 24th July 1928. *Diário de Notícias*, 31st October 1928.

27 *Diário de Notícias*, 2nd August 1920.

2004). Portugal knew its effects in 1899, when the city of Porto was targeted, but its spread to other parts of the country was able to be avoided (MORAIS, 2011). In November 1910, suspicious cases emerged in the capital, more precisely in the Alfama neighbourhood. After a medical visit to the most degraded areas, it was concluded that this was an occasional outbreak and not an epidemic, although 32 people were hospitalized as a preventive measure. Nevertheless, people were urged not to cover up suspected cases and encouraged to strengthen their hygiene care. As a prophylactic measure, a real hunt for mice and rats was launched, and “hunters” who delivered these rodents to the police or to health services were rewarded²⁸.

At the time, the plague was already recognized as being endemic in some parts of the world, namely China, India and Russia. Pasteur Institute specialists also linked its occurrence in these regions to the consumption of wild animal meat, particularly marmots. The Portuguese press was reporting that the disease had already caused 300 deaths in the Manchuria region of China in September 1933, and, in December of the following year, it was the turn of the Chinese city of Nanjing to see thousands of victims²⁹.

1.7 Tuberculosis

Less reported than the plague, but a cause of great concern, was tuberculosis which, during the period under analysis, was the main cause of death in Portugal³⁰. The published news intended to demonstrate its danger within the national territory, and to alert towards the need to adopt measures to prevent its spread. In 1927, it was reported that 20,000 Portuguese were killed annually out of 60,000 infected. We have to consider that these numbers could be wrong, given that it was possible that the disease was confused with other pathologies, such as chronic bronchitis. The most problematic situation was happening in the district of Lisbon, the most affected in the country by far. In 1929, the press announced that, in the capital alone, the illness caused 3000 deaths a year, and to stop these numbers two extra sanatoriums and anti-tuberculous dispensaries were created³¹. Still in the 1920s, news emerged about the discoveries made so far and reports were made on the effectiveness of BCG, in addition to the fight against tuberculosis in the army, the role of the State in fighting the disease and the creation of more public bodies. However, in the 1930s, the difficulties in providing medical assistance persisted, namely the lack of a specific treatment for those with tuberculosis, who by not having a place in sanatoriums, tried to be admitted in general

28 *Diário de Notícias*, 4th November 1910.

29 *Diário de Notícias*, 29th December 1934.

30 Regarding tuberculosis and the high number of deaths it caused, it should be noted that we are talking about a pre-antibiotic era. The invention of penicillin in 1928 revolutionized the fight against infectious diseases (PEREIRA & PITA, 2005).

31 *Diário de Notícias*, 18th October 1929.

hospitals, which was not always possible given the lack of wards or isolation chambers available.

1.8 Malaria

Another disease that featured the national news in the first decades of the 20th century was malaria. Also known as paludism, ague or jungle fever, this illness manifested through seizures, and existed in several places around the European continent. In Italy, for example, it was seen as a national problem ever since the unification of the country, and its fight was even used as a political propaganda slogan by the fascist regime (SNOWDEN 2020). We cannot precise the exact date when the first Portuguese cases emerged, but there had been some diagnosis in the 18th century, and measures had been adopted to both understand it and fight it during the 19th century (GAMA, 2010; LOBO, 2012).

In Portugal, and in order to control malaria numbers, the Ministry of the Interior authorized the creation of antimalarial posts in 1927, under a proposal of the Directorate-General of Health. During Estado Novo, especially in the early days of the new regime, the fight against malaria gained special momentum. The situation in Benavente was one of the most problematic, requiring the intervention of the health authorities and the creation of dispensaries and antimalarial posts. A Malariology Research Station was set up with the support of the Directorate-General of Health, and intended to observe patients. In addition to using quinine to treat the sick, studies were carried out on the flora existing in pits and rice fields, and as a result a real “hunt” for mosquitos was undertaken.

In Salvaterra de Magos, an outbreak of malaria emerged in the early 1930s. Health authorities went to the locality with the purpose of finding out its origin and, at the same time, visiting the hospital where the patients were admitted. After analysing the collected data, it was concluded that the situation in Benavente and Salvaterra de Magos, two villages in the district of Santarém, was connected to the swampy lands used for rice production.

Another outbreak happened in Alcácer do Sal, a town belonging to the district of Setúbal and considered the “maximum focus” of malaria in Portugal in 1933. Here, the situation was highly problematic. It was a rice-growing area with many workers coming from various parts of the country, who ended up acting as disseminators of the disease. Following on the efforts led by various local entities (Town Hall, some parish councils, *Misericórdia*, Alcacerense Mutual Aid Association and wider entities), the village created an antimalarial post. In addition, a brigade was organized to combat field larvae using Paris green, one of the first insecticides ever used but causing extreme toxicity to mammals³². In 1934, the post was closed by the Directorate-General of

32 *Diário de Notícias*, 14th May 1933.

Health triggering several riots amongst the population, who considered the structure as being fundamental in treating the poor and providing them with free medicine³³.

In 1933, in Azambuja, a village in the district of Lisbon, there was a resurgence of malaria and the explanation for its origin was again the rice fields, as farmers failed to comply with the law and stagnant waters favoured the presence of mosquitoes, its prime transmitters³⁴.

In that same year, the antimalarial post in the Algarve city of Loulé had to be reopened. To fight the disease, the authorities mainly focused on raising the population's awareness about hygiene care. At the time, the Catholic University Youth Medical Section (Secção de Medicina da Juventude Universitária Católica) distributed 25,000 copies of the "Paludism" brochure, authored by physician Luís Figueira from the Câmara Pestana Bacteriological Institute.

In 1932, the country spent 126,808\$35 in its fight against malaria, and among other measures, there was an investment in scientific research, alongside a collaboration between hydraulic and agricultural services; the reporting of seizure cases in all under-treatment areas; the creation of health records for people who travelled around the country and the obligation for them to undergo examinations when entering or leaving regions; the assessment of houses in the most affected areas; the surveillance of schools, the raising of children's awareness about the disease, and consequently their families; the promotion of antimalarial and general hygiene propaganda carried out by visiting nurses; the establishment of mobile brigades to support the treatment of patients; the installation of a centre for the treatment of general paralysis and other diseases caused by malaria; in addition to scientific data exchange with foreign organizations³⁵.

In September 1934, an antimalarial post was created in the Douro region, and considered essential in providing help for the area between Peso da Régua and Barca de Alva. It proved to be highly useful in dealing with an outbreak of malaria the following year, during which it assisted over 1000 patients³⁶.

1.9 Dysentery

Dysentery was also part of the country's disease framework, although it was less featured in the press. Transmitted through food, contaminated water, flies, or just from person to person through infected faeces, this disease crossed centuries and reached contemporaneity, whilst continuing to register high frequency levels. Its resurgence in the 19th century, particularly in the second half, was linked with the consumption of untreated cow's milk. In 1919, in Portugal, more

33 *Diário de Notícias*, 1st November 1934.

34 *Diário de Notícias*, 1st July 1933.

35 *Diário de Notícias*, 20th July 1933.

36 *Diário de Notícias*, 2nd September 1934.

precisely in Oliveira de Azeméis, there was a serious epidemic of dysentery. At the time, the local health authorities were accused of contributing to its spread by initially assuming a denial attitude and, consequently, not acting in a timely manner, thus delaying the adoption of measures the situation required. At the same time in Aveiro, the disease manifested itself in a violent manner, affecting entire villages, especially children, but also causing the death of adults.

1.10 Poliomyelitis

Another disease that became a worldwide concern during the 19th century, but with very few references in the Portuguese press, was polio, a disease caused by a virus in existence for centuries, but only identified in the eighteen-hundreds. This was the century that saw several outbreaks emerging in the United States of America and Europe, which persisted and even worsened with the arrival of the new century.

In 1928, the pages of *Diário de Notícias* talked about the disease and the need to create some viable answers. Portugal suffered an outbreak in 1933 and another one in 1936, which ended up spreading to different parts of the country. In the 1940s, it continued to be endemic, but the territory saw more serious waves happening, as the one in 1946. It was the turn of Porto to be the most affected city the following year.

1.11 Diseases and public health care: other news, other topics

Cases of sudden death or death without a diagnosis were constantly featured in the newspapers, and similar circumstances happened with news on suicides or mental disorders. These trends definitely contributed to press sensationalism, which was considered by some as being potentially dangerous, especially in the case of suicides, as there was the fear that in addition to feeding the morbid curiosity of readers, this type of news could end up encouraging similar actions.

News about sanitary and phytosanitary measures, public hygiene procedures and urban cleaning were constantly featured in the periodicals that did not hesitate to denounce the lack of cleanliness in public spaces, as well as in various institutions, such as hospitals, prisons or asylums. Sanitation, the quality of drinking water, waste treatment, the lack of control over food hygiene, or the movement of animals around the urban space had all been issues addressed in other European cities during the 19th century, but which persisted in Portugal, as they had not been resolved at the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, they were at the origin of the spread of several diseases, such as typhoid fever and dysentery. In the 1920s, there were even reports of sinister situations; for example, the transportation of corpses from Oeiras to the Institute of Forensic Medicine, in Lisbon,

in carts also used to carry litter³⁷. The poor life quality of the “islands” in Porto or the “courtyards” in Lisbon was described by the press in rather violent terms. The lack of hygiene conditions was identified as being a serious problem in these neighbourhoods that were mainly inhabited by working class families (SEIXAS, 2011)³⁸.

In the timeframe considered for our analysis, a type of discourse followed by the press was identified, one which tended to blame the poor for the emergence of disease outbreaks and the spread of epidemics, pointing out their promiscuous behaviour and their lack of hygiene habits (PEREIRA & PITA, 2011). The city of Porto was considered the unhealthiest in the country in the first decade of the previous century, due to the lack of sanitation, the lack of control over the sale of food products and the general filth and absence of standard living conditions in the “islands”. It should be noted that most often than not the population failed to accept the measures proposed with a view to solving health problems, particularly during epidemics. They would either simply express their discontent publicly or cause riots.

The health status of colonies was also featured in the press, albeit sparingly (AMARAL, 2008; 2012). In 1927, it was reported that, in response to an appeal on behalf of the League of Nations, Portugal appointed a commission of delegates to study the health conditions in West Africa. This resulted in an assessment of assistance services to the territories, alongside the creation of strategies to perfect them³⁹.

News about vaccination, prophylaxis, treatment or illnesses could either refer to progresses being made in Portugal or focus on discoveries made by foreign medical research. Cancer concerns began to appear in newspapers. In 1923, the creation of the Portuguese Cancer Institute and the use of lead in England to treat the nuisance were reported with successful rates (COSTA, 2011; 2011). In the 1930s, advances in the field of oncology continued to be publicized and celebrated, which also denoted the growing social concern with the disease. In 1927, *Diário de Notícias* quoted an intervention made by a doctor at the Royal College of Physicians on cancer, and described it as “*the most threatening and inexorable of all diseases*”⁴⁰.

Conclusion

In conclusion, and although conditioned by several factors, namely of a political nature affecting the way the press presented reality, newspapers did reflect the popular health concerns in the early decades of the 20th century. Despite the reforms and changes promoted by the different

37 *Diário de Notícias*, 15th May 1927.

38 *A Capital*, 5th March 1913.

39 *Diário de Notícias*, 3rd February 1917.

40 *Diário de Notícias*, 30 de janeiro de 1927.

regimes governing the country during this time period, a conclusion was reached in the 1950s about Portugal's failure to fight several diseases, attested by its the high mortality rates when compared to data coming from other countries. The press also conveyed the fear that the populations continued to show in the face of the threat of diseases. This can be explained, at least in part, by the inexistence or ineffectiveness of assistance services that would often fail to help the population when they most needed it.

The Portuguese press gave less and less importance to news related to health and diseases from the 1930s onwards.

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