Letter to the Editor

The case when anatomist and surgeon Gaspare Tagliacozzi offended God: an endless clash between religion and medical ethics

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To the Editor,

Since the early days of religious medicine, for a therapist to disobey the priests’ views was supposed to be a sin, requiring a sacrifice to the offended God. No eminence of gifts, no splendor of reputation could shelter from the wrath of the offended divine, and the soul of such a physician should go unpardoned into eternity [1]. Medicine was evolved into a science soon after the Hippocratic sterilized medicine from superstition, introducing at the same time medical ethics. In such a way, medical practice was guided to a non-harmful concept during its exercise. However, religion had its own opinion. Various acts like dissection and abortion were prohibited [2]. Medico-philosophers of ancient Greece, physicians, and scholars of the Byzantine era alongside the remarkable Arabian School of Medicine gave to the world a more convincing hope for a cure. Meanwhile, there were cases, when the church felt otherwise. Such an example was the Catholic Church during its dark ages and the case of the Italian anatomist and surgeon Gaspare Tagliacozzi (1545-1599) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Portrait of Tagliacozzi in young age, ca 1580.
The Renaissance stigmatized the rebirth of significant branches of medicine which have been neglected during the dark ages, especially in the Western European territories. A series of treatises translated by Arabian works enriched western literature, while the ancient Greek medicine alongside with the Hippocratic doctrines, once more came in vogue through the treatises of the Arabs and Muslims who had previously embraced and ameliorated them [2]. Although various ancient surgeons, like Heliodorus from Egypt (1st century AD), Antyllus from Rome (2nd century AD), and Cleopatra Metrodora (1st, 2nd, or 7th century AD) accomplished significant results in plastic surgery [3-4], it was the skilful work of Gaspare Tagliacozzi of Bologna Italy which established plastic surgery in Western European Medicine, even if it was originally cursed and prohibited to be exercised all around the Catholic countries [5].

Tagliacozzi obtained excellent results with his surgical operations. He had summarized all his life's experience and gained knowledge in his treatise "De Curtorum Chirurgia per Insitionem" (The Surgery of Deformities by Transplantation), published in 1597 AD. In his masterpiece, he detailed theory behind every procedure mentioning previous accomplishments, he had recorded the available during his era surgical instrumentation and described progressively, in a step by step narration, his reconstructive interventions, as well as the post-operative bandaging and care of the patient. Tagliacozzi also desired a detailed depiction of his work, manufactured eventually with an iconography-woodcut series under his supervision [6-7]. His innovative surgical technique, which consisted of reconstructing parts of the face by grafting, was masterfully described in his work and made him famous. However, a disfiguration during that era was considered a divine punished due to mortal sin, or was practiced during an amputation as a sign of humiliation to adulterers, thieves, and prisoners of war. His work attracted concerns from the Roman Catholic Church and excited its wrath for being unethical. For the priests, Tagliacozzi messed up with God's work, aiming as a mortal not only to correct God's given malformation but also to achieve a visual human perfection with his endeavors [5,8].

The impact of Tagliacozzi's techniques endured time and are still in use, mostly in musculoskeletal oncology reconstruction [6]. Surgeon and professor in medicine, Italian Gaspare Tagliacozzi who died in the age of 54, was a fine example of the Catholic Church's intolerance of aesthetic surgery. How can mere mortals know what offends God in medical practice? Medical scientists sometimes use extreme methods in the edge of medical ethics, while on the other hand religion may be extremely conservative against medical progress. A golden rule, for every case, somewhere in the middle between the triangle ethics, religion, and medicine should be established for an endless and unnecessary tug of war to be avoided.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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References


