Postcards from the past: The Third SICOT Congress, Bologna 1936

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Abstract This manuscript describes the events and eminent personalities who animated the third Congress of the “Société Internationale de Chirurgie Orthopédique et Traumatologie”, held in Bologna (Italy) in 1936. During this meeting the Society acquired its definitive name and the acronym under which it is now internationally recognized, SICOT. Some of the most illustrious clinicians and scientists of those times gathered in Bologna to discuss the progress of orthopaedic science, thus contributing to highlight the relevance of this discipline in the medical field. Italian surgeon Vittorio Putti was the Congress Chairman and his words, together with some original pictures from his 1936 photo gallery, are shown to celebrate appropriately a prestigious moment in the history of SICOT.

Keywords SICOT · 3rd Congress · Bologna 1936 · Vittorio Putti

Introduction

The great progress in medical knowledge that was made in the last century can be attributed, at least partially, to the contributions provided by Scientific Societies, which nowadays include hundreds of members who join together and share their experience and the results of their research activity. A major role in this effort is played by the powerful means of

communication available today, but technology would be useless without the determination and the willpower of all the people involved in the current scientific debate.

In times when being part of a scientific society means merely attending the yearly Congress and being on time in the abstract sending process, the present paper aims at rediscovering the glorious origins of one of the oldest Orthopaedic Societies in the world, the Société Internationale de Chirurgie Orthopédique et Traumatologie (SICOT). SICOT was founded on the ideas of brilliant men such as Vittorio Putti, who was one of the first orthopaedic surgeons to understand that international collaboration was essential to improve our medical discipline and to provide the best care for our patients.

SICOT was set up in 1929 by some of the most illustrious orthopaedic surgeons from all over the world, with the aim of developing and spreading the most innovative findings in the field of musculoskeletal medicine, and reaching a consensus on the best treatment options for different diseases. Originally named Société Internationale de Chirurgie Orthopédique (SICO), its history spans over more than 80 years, and the famous names that have been part of it are themselves evidence of excellence. Beyond remembering the bright origins of SICOT, this paper also describes the contribution of some Masters, whose examples should always be remembered by today's surgeons.

SICOT: a new name but the same purpose....

“Since 1913, in a talk I had with Dr. Robert Lovett of Boston and Dr. Robert Jones of Liverpool, I evinced the idea that for contributing towards a more rapid progress and a more ample diffusion of orthopaedic studies, a society should be formed to unite the orthopaedic

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specialists of the entire world. My proposal was welcomed with much interest and the statute was already in preparation when the world war interrupted our plans. The project was seriously taken up for the second time in 1923, in Boston, where I met Lovett and Jones, but even this time it had to be abandoned owing to the death of Dr. Lovett. Finally, in London, at the Meeting of the American and English Orthopaedic Societies under the Presidency of Dr. Albee I finally found the long desired opportunity. I talked the matter over with Dr. Albee and it was in part due to his rapid and energetic activity if, in a few months, the basis of the society was laid and the first congress convened in Paris on the 2nd of October 1930. It is a great satisfaction for me, dear colleagues, to see that this third Meeting will also be a success...”

The words above come from the welcome address made by Vittorio Putti on the eve of the ‘IIIème Congrès’ of the Société Internationale de Chirurgie Orthopédique, held in Bologna and Rome, 21–25 September 1936. The world was very different then: among other things French was the international language of the scientific community and “our” SICOT was missing its final “T”.

Vittorio Putti, as President of the Congress, co-founder of SICO and Director of the hosting Rizzoli Orthopaedic Institute [1] (Fig. 1), saw fit to make a clear statement about the current situation of orthopaedics in the opening of the meeting. He defined it a “doctrine”, clearly stated its purpose as “surgery of the organs of movement”, that needed to be “in strict contact with general medicine” to keep evolving and corresponding to the modern theories about general constitution and systemic diseases.

A praise to orthopaedic surgery, “real art in the Greek sense of the word”, apex of technical perfection in method and instruments, and the main way “in repairing the terrible damages which, every day more, trauma produces to the human body in peace and war”.

Putti could not know what would become of the world shortly afterwards, how much desperation and hurt would have struck the international scene in a few years, but he fully understood the current and future meaning of ‘trauma’, and the importance of orthopaedic surgeons, who were responsible for curing the multitude of wounded in the aftermath of the Great War. As an example, 500,000 amputations were performed during the First World War. Thus it is possible to understand the delicate task orthopaedic practitioners were dedicated to.

However, as Putti said, an orthopaedic surgeon is not required only in war time, but even in peace. Especially after the industrial revolution and the spread of heavy machinery for industry, and also due to an increase in civil traffic, a sudden rise of accidents was documented worldwide: a new, global landscape of traumatic injuries, which brings us back to the missing “T”.

In a letter dated September 1, 1936 and sent to all the Italian members of the Society, Putti wrote of his intention to propose a change to the Society name, adding ‘Traumatology’ (*et de Traumatologie*) to better explain its mission and scope.

This name change was not a minor matter. Orthopaedics was still a new and young science, quickly growing but yet not completely matured and experienced. This formal inclusion of traumatology as an integral part of the object of the orthopaedic discipline was absolutely needed. Orthopaedics was no longer the same science that was conceived and described by

Fig. 1 The monumental entrance of the Rizzoli Orthopaedic Institute (Bologna), founded in 1896

III^o Congresso della Soc. Internaz. di Chirurgia Ortopedica
Bologna - Roma. 21 - 25 Settembre 1936.

Nicolas Andry in 1741 [2]. It was no longer just aimed at correcting the deformities of the body but at healing and treating all the damages and diseases of the musculoskeletal system.

By 1936, orthopaedic surgeons were already doing that, but it was up to their society to finally adopt and officially certify it.

The year before, again in Bologna, commenting on the foundation of SIOT (Italian Society of Orthopaedic and Traumatology), precisely concerning that “T”, Putti stated, “A name, a banner or a uniform have more strength than lengthy arguments to clarify and to understand an idea or a principle” [3].

Therefore, thanks to Vittorio Putti’s foresight, the name of the Society was changed into SICOT and, more than 75 years later, it is still known worldwide under this acronym.

The Congress: the legacy of illustrious members

The third SICOT Congress was the biggest yet: the first to be held over five days, in two cities starting with Bologna and ending in Rome, fully supported (albeit with very little economic involvement) by the Italian government. The Rizzoli Orthopaedic Institute’s archive houses a great deal of documents, letters and other material about the ‘thrill’ of the Fascist Government concerning its contribution to the organization of the Congress; the Society and Putti himself covered almost all the expenses.

In 1936, SICO claimed 329 members across 28 countries; 121 of them (plus wives, children and others relatives) were in Bologna to attend the Congress as representatives of the SICOT branches of Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Swiss, the United States of America, and Yugoslavia.

The first day of congress (Fig. 2) was occupied by bureaucratic issues about budget and programs, the inclusion of new individual members and new national societies, greetings and so on, to conclude with a very not-bureaucratic, elegant banquet at Palazzo dei Podestà, hosted by the Presidency (Fig. 3).

On the morning of September 22nd, the real Congress started with a big ceremony attended by the city authorities, such as the Prefect, the Cardinal, the University Rector, various Generals and Government representatives. The afternoon saw the beginning of the debate about the ‘internal injuries of the knee’, as related by Professors Valls, Mathieu, Platt and Kalina, followed by 32 more speakers. It was the first time for an orthopaedic congress to begin with a trauma topic: the discussion ranged from meniscal injuries to those of the cruciate and collateral ligaments, explaining and describing the different pathologies and how to operate in individual cases. Every speaker contributed extensively to the debate showing his own personal and national experiences, techniques and results.

*lunedì 21 Settembre 1936.
Riunione del Comitato Internazionale*

Fig. 2 September 21st, 1936—The start of the meeting of the International Committee, chaired by Vittorio Putti

Valls talked in detail about whether and when to resort to surgery, i.e. early within a few days after the trauma for meniscal injuries, only in case of extreme damage to the cruciate ligaments, and in the second week after the accident for the collateral ligaments. He concluded his speech with examples and step-by-step instructions on the best way to treat each specific case.

Mathieu amplified the topic of diagnosis by adding further categories of injuries (tibial spine avulsion, foreign bodies in the knee and “special” injuries of the synovial membrane) and delved in the symptoms, outlining the issues about identifying different injuries, and also stressing the need to improve the technology for clinical examinations.

Platt presented a case study about the different types of meniscal lesions, marking the differences between longitudinal “fractures” of the meniscus due to an acute trauma, and the “secondary displacements” of meniscal fragments associated with repeated traumatic events. He insisted on the difficulties to reach a correct diagnosis because of confusing symptoms.

In the end, Kalina summed up the conclusions of his colleagues and showed the benefits of a new radiographic

Fig. 3 The opening ceremony and Gran Gala

technique, pneumoradiography, teaching how to proceed correctly in the preparation of the exams, how to obtain the best results, and how to understand and interpret them to achieve the clearest diagnosis possible.

The second great theme of the congress, discussed the following day, was the ‘arthrorisis in the sequelae of infantile paralysis’. Relators were Louis Rocher and Piero Palagi. This kind of surgery was an Italian field of excellence and particularly one of the great achievements of Vittorio Putti during his tenure at the Rizzoli Institute. During the lively debate the Italian surgeon was honored

without flattery by his eminent international colleagues, showing the respect the Society held for Putti who greatly contributed to raise the profile of the Italian Orthopaedic School. Beyond the scientific contents, this third SICOT congress vastly expanded the ranks of the Society with Italians equalling the Americans for the highest number of members at 40, followed by France, England and Germany. It was also the first congress to have a surgical amphitheater where it was possible to attend “live surgery” demonstrations; it was a large hall with terraces and ladders to accommodate the guests (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Vittorio Putti: live surgery demonstration

Fig. 5 The Industries Exhibition hallway

Another first was the installation, inside the Rizzoli Institute, of a scientific exhibition of instruments and technical devices: a never-seen-before exposition of anatomical models, radiographs and photos, with stands full of orthopaedic equipment, prosthesis and various surgical instruments, and rooms for watching surgical videos from all the participating nations. It was also an opportunity for 30 exhibitors from ten different countries to display their production, marking the shift toward the beginning of the “industrialization” of medical equipment (Fig. 5).

In the evening of the last day in Bologna, in the very same surgical amphitheatre, a jolly ‘movie’ was shown with scenes from the past days fervent debates and from the late parties of

which, unfortunately, there are no documented traces today apart from the testimonies of appreciation by the audience. With regards to this, it is nice to remember that the congress organizers planned a busy schedule also for the ladies, with guided tours of Bologna, lunches and tea breaks in the best restaurants of the city, and receptions in some of the town’s great palaces and even a trip to Ravenna (Fig. 6).

The fifth and final day of the congress, after taking the fourth one to travel there, was held in Rome. It consisted of a visit to the newly built Orthopaedic Clinic inside the University Campus and a live surgery demonstration in the ultra-modern operating room, commissioned by the Director Riccardo Dalla Vedova, futuristic for the lighting technology

Fig. 6 Portraits of orthopaedic surgeons’ wives enjoying a social event in Bologna

and the glass ceiling. In the afternoon, a delegation of 40 members went to a formal meeting with Benito Mussolini at Palazzo Venezia, where the importance of orthopaedics for a country of soldiers and fighters was discussed. The dark times of World War II were still far off and Vittorio Putti took advantage of that special occasion to highlight the role and importance of orthopaedics for the welfare of the entire society:

“My Dear Colleagues!

An old Master of Orthopaedics affirmed recently [...] that the achievements in preventing the causes of crippling and deformities were such that soon there would be no longer any reason for Orthopaedics to exist! I wish to Heaven that, for the good of humanity, it was possible that the optimistic horoscope of our eminent Colleague might come true, but, as yet, I cannot see the precursory signs of any such rosy future. It does seem to me however that the ways of progress and success of our specialty are clearly marked by the vigorous development which our Society has reached in these few years, by the even increasing interest in its Congresses, by the formation of new national associations, by the multiplication of periodicals and by the growth of confidence which the public shows in our work.

Thus will come to pass the prophecy of Francesco Rizzoli, who more than a century ago, when Orthopaedics was unknown except in name, intuitively foreseeing its great development, founded an Orthopaedic Institute so that it should serve for the good of humanity, for the progress of science, for the decorum of the Country. It is towards these aims that today Orthopaedic Surgery is securely advancing, animated by our ambition, sustained by our will, blessed by those who have been relieved from suffering and have gained a new hope of happiness.”

Conclusion

Exploring the past and looking for the true roots of our discipline is a fruitful activity, both for young researchers and more experienced practitioners. That is the sense of all historical research, namely, rediscovering the origins [4] to strengthen your own motivation in going onwards looking at the enlightened figures who contributed greatly to shape our profession [5–7]. In the present paper we brought into light some glorious moments of the very beginning in the activity of the Société Internationale de Chirurgie Orthopédique et Traumatologie (SICOT). An extraordinary number of eminent

scientists and clinicians founded the Society and directed it towards playing such a relevant role in the current orthopaedic debate. These figures are true “Masters” and their teachings are the real legacy we should rely on. In remembering those moments and those brilliant surgeons who gathered in Bologna in 1936, the prophetic words by Vittorio Putti seem again the best way to summarize what SICOT has achieved during its 84-year-long history:

“[...] as I had foreseen, the International Society of Orthopaedic Surgery has become, in a short time, the supreme Court of our discipline, the organic center of our work, the most concrete and tangible affirmation of our will to perfect a section of surgery of which no longer anyone can deny, I do not say, the right of an autonomous life, but the recognition of those benefits which it brings to humanity and the great contribution which it gives to science.”

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