

## HISTORY OF DERMATOLOGY

# On Social Prophylaxis of Venereal Diseases by Doctors Bravo, Covisa, Sáinz De Aja, and Villarejo

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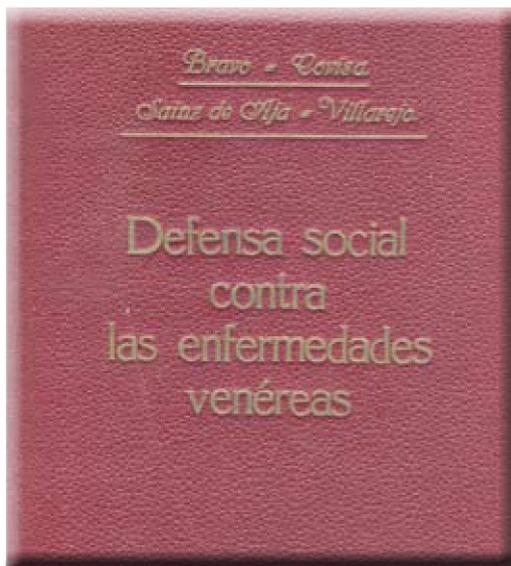
**Abstract.** *On Social Prophylaxis of Venereal Diseases* is a book written by 4 Spanish dermatologists: Bravo, Covisa, Sáinz de Aja, and Villarejo. It is an illustration of the information provided on venereal disease at the beginning of the twentieth century in Spain.

**Key words:** history, prophylaxis, syphilis.

### « DEFENSA SOCIAL CONTRA LAS ENFERMEDADES VENÉREAS », POR LOS DRES. BRAVO, COVISA, SÁINZ DE AJA Y VILLAREJO

**Resumen.** El libro *Defensa social contra las enfermedades venéreas*, de los doctores Bravo, Covisa, Sáinz de Aja y Villarejo, representó un modelo de la propaganda que contra las enfermedades de transmisión sexual se realizó en España a principios del siglo xx.

**Palabras clave:** historia, profilaxis, sífilis.



**Figure 1.** Cover of the book.

## Introduction

I found this little volume (Figure 1), a mere 54 pages long, during a stroll through the popular “Cuesta de los Libros,” better known as the “Cuesta de Moyano,” [translator’s note: an outdoor market for new, used, rare, and out-of-print books] in Madrid.

The title, “On Social Prophylaxis of Venereal Diseases,” leaves no doubt as to its contents.

## The Book’s Aim

This is a little manual written to inform the general public of the clinical signs of venereal diseases, to alert people to forms of contagion, and to encourage the potential patient, in a tone bordering on pleading, to take the appropriate measures in order to avoid contracting these diseases.

Once infected, patients are urged to consult a medical professional qualified in the diagnosis and treatment of venereal infections, and to seek a cure in order to avoid transmitting the infection to those near and dear to them.

## Financing and Publication

Publication of the book was financed by Rafael Larco Herrera, a philanthropist of Peruvian origin and honorary

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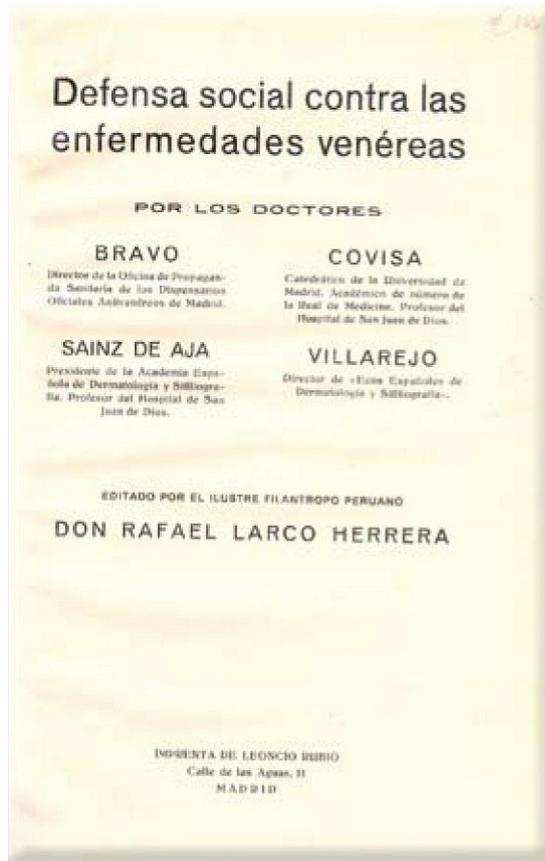


Figure 2. First page of the book.

president of the Social Prophylaxis League Against Venereal Disease of Lima. Don Rafael, concerned about “the extraordinary increase in the incidence of these problems, in small towns as well as in big cities...,” visited the city of Madrid and contacted the authors (Figure 2) to propose publishing a book on the subject.

The only publication date I was able to find for the book is the one provided by Mr. Larco, who signed his name to the preface “in the city of Chiclín in the year 1929.”

The press where the book was printed was “Leoncio Rubio,” located in turn-of-the-20th-century Madrid at number 11, Calle de las Aguas.

## The Authors

As authors Larco chose 4 of the dermatologists best prepared to wage war on sexually transmitted diseases at the time. These 4 authors are:



Figure 3. Julio Bravo Santfeliú.

1. Bravo, a dermatologist from Zaragoza born at the end of the 19th century, also a novelist and playwright (Figure 3). In 1921, having successfully presented his candidacy in the nationwide public competitive examinations known as *oposiciones*, he entered the Official Corps of Physicians Against Venereal Disease, and was assigned to Madrid. An expert in the field of what we would now call health promotion,<sup>1</sup> he is identified in the book as the director of the Health Propaganda Office of the Official Anti-Venereal Disease Dispensaries of Madrid (Figure 4).
2. Covisa, who trained some of the greatest figures in Spanish dermatology, professor of dermatology at the University of Madrid, member of the Royal Society of Medicine, and professor at the Hospital de San Juan de Dios.
3. Sáinz de Aja, a well-known and multitalented figure in Spanish dermatology, president of the Spanish Academy of Dermatology and Syphilology, and professor at the Hospital San Juan de Dios. He is the author of other books intended for the general public on the same subject.<sup>2,3</sup>
4. Villarejo, director of *Ecos Españoles de Dermatología y Sifiliografía*, a specialized journal published between 1925 and 1933.

## Chapters

The book is divided into several sections. The titles and authors are listed below, with comments on the most relevant passages.



Figure 4. "Syphilis," by Ramón Casas.

### By Way of Preface (D. Rafael Larco Herrera)

Following a brief statement of his reasons for promoting the creation of this book, the magnate offers his thanks to the distinguished authors for their participation in the project.

### General Concepts Relating to Venereal Diseases That Are Absolutely Necessary for All Citizens (Dr. Villarejo)

In this chapter the reader is reminded that "in modern societies, these diseases are discussed without embarrassment, without fear of divine punishment."

Parents are reminded of their obligations to "instruct [their sons], as soon as they become men, in all the dangers that await them from a sexual point of view," and sons are reminded that they owe "obedience to their

parents, whose guidance is intended to protect their health."

Next, he reviews the clinical signs of syphilis, summing them up as follows: "Any break in the skin, abrasion or sore that fails to heal or develops in an unusual way should rouse suspicion..., especially if the lesion is located in the mouth, anus, or genitals."

With respect to women, the author states that "if a woman suffers repeated miscarriages, especially if they occur between 3 and 4 months, they are almost certainly caused by syphilis that must be identified in one or both sexual partners and treated."

After listing the different cutaneous and systemic manifestations of congenital syphilis, he says, "whenever you detect any of these or other, even rarer and more abnormal changes in your children, take them to a specialist in venereal diseases, and he will surely save their lives. If you do not, you will condemn your child to endless suffering and in many cases to death."

In regard to treatments for syphilis available at the time the book was written, he makes the following observations: "Syphilis patients should not, under any circumstances, stop taking the medication prescribed by the specialist until told to do so...". He warns those inclined to be incautious that "When your doctor believes that the syphilis is cured there are tests and procedures to determine this. Patients should know what these are and demand that the specialist perform them; if he does not, this is reason to mistrust his scientific competence and seriousness of purpose..."

In similar terms, the author describes blennorrhoea and its consequences.

At the end of the chapter, he notes, "In any and all patients, regardless of their disease, we should suspect syphilis; if the problem is chronic, they are doubly suspect. Early diagnosis of syphilis saves the patient's life... Early treatment for syphilis never harms the patient...".

### How to Avoid Contracting Syphilis and How to Cure It

The author, Dr. Julio Bravo Santfeliú, explains in this chapter how persons affected by a sexually transmitted disease should conduct themselves:

1. If possible, practice sexual continence until marriage.
2. Avoid all sexual contact with persons of libertine ways and women of easy virtue since, in principle, any sexual relation outside of marriage involves the risk of contagion.
3. Be scrupulously clean, use a condom, or at least, following coitus, wash the genitals with soap and

water. In addition, a preventative ointment may be applied; but despite all these precautions, one should not let down one's guard, but examine oneself carefully every day.

4. Seek medical attention at the first sign of infection, however insignificant it may seem, and comply unflinchingly with the treatment prescribed.
5. Have faith, hope, and constancy in pursuing a cure for the disease."

In a second section dealing with aspects of prevention and treatment of blennorrhoea, the author repeats the advice given concerning syphilis, although he recognizes that "to date, no treatment for blennorrhoea has been found that is as effective and easy to use as medication for syphilis."

Bravo was one of the dermatologists convinced of the "importance of propaganda in the fight against venereal diseases."

As head of the Propaganda Office of the Executive Committee Against Venereal Disease, he includes as illustrations for the book a series of informative posters warning the public against the "menace of venereal disease." These posters have been collected and published in a book by our colleague Dr. Carlos Daudén Sala.<sup>4</sup>

The basic message of the book appears in one of the final paragraphs of this chapter: "It is not enough to have at our disposal the finest weapons and techniques. The cooperation of the public is absolutely essential, and this is the fruit of enlightenment and knowledge."

## What Patients Should Know About the Treatment of Venereal Diseases

In the first part of this chapter, Covisa reiterates, in a paternalistic tone, advice already given: "Children! Do not hide from your parents diseases you have contracted! Parents! Take care of your children when they fall victim to these social evils, and do not treat them as blameworthy and undeserving of your pardon, but as sick persons in need of your support."

Having made this plea, the author describes the pharmacopeia available at the time, explaining in language easily understood by the reader the side effects most often accompanying treatment with Salvarsan.

## Blennorrhoea, Syphilis, Marriage, and Children

Dr. Álvarez Sáinz de Aja begins this chapter with a recommendation to the reader: "If you decide to marry, first carefully examine your conscience, review your

sexual past, and in any case see a specialist known for his competence and seriousness: he will set your mind at rest and assure you of future happiness.

One of the most interesting sections of this last chapter of the book refers to the debate concerning how long a period of time after completion of treatment is necessary for the patient to be considered disease-free and therefore "a candidate for marriage." The author asks, "When can the syphilitic get married?" and answers, "This is purely a matter of medical judgment; and each case is different, no matter how similar to others it may seem; despite this, the patient should be aware of current legislation..."

Sáinz de Aja considers that at least 2 years should elapse between successful treatment of the disease and marriage. He stresses, however, that "in cases of quaternary neurosyphilis, marriage should never be permitted."

Finally, the reader is reminded of a series of basic premises.

One of these is that "the child of a syphilitic mother may never be given to a wet-nurse; either it must be nursed by the mother, or given artificial formula."

And another: "When only one partner has syphilis, it is prudent to separate the sexes within the home to prevent infecting the spouse; only when the affected partner has met the abovementioned conditions for marriage can resumption of sexual relations be authorized."

The chapter ends with a plea: "Reader: syphilis, like smallpox and plague, is destined to vanish; contagion can be avoided to protect the healthy."

Today, in mid-2008, smallpox has been eradicated and the incidence of plague has diminished notably, while syphilis has not only not been eradicated, but in recent years the number of patients diagnosed with the disease has increased.

Is there better proof of human obliviousness?

### Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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