

From the influenza of 1918-1919 to the poliomyelitis epidemics in Spain.  
International research visits in the process of scientific-sanitary modernisation  
*De la gripe de 1918-1919 a las epidemias de poliomielitis en España. Estancias  
internacionales de investigación en el proceso de modernización científico-sanitario*

María Isabel Porras Gallo\* 

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

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ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

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The approach to infectious diseases, a major social problem in Spain in the early 20th century, changed after the introduction of bacteriology. The medical profession saw this pathology as avoidable, because it would be sufficient to have specific sera and vaccines against each infectious process, after isolating the causal germ. To do so meant involving the laboratory in its management, and employing specialised staff. In that context, training visits to European and American centres of bacteriological and virological research were the key to these healthcare professionals obtaining that specialisation, and being able to adapt it to their countries' approach to the infectious pathology.

This paper gives a brief overview of the impact of the 1918-1919 flu and the polio epidemics and the responses to them, to show how they were a challenge and also an opportunity to draw attention to the role that could be played by health professionals specialising in bacteriology, and later virology, in international centres; and where new prophylactic and therapeutic resources –serums and vaccines– could fit into this new approach. It uses medical, scientific and legislative sources, a selection from the general press, and archival and printed documentation of the WHO and the methodology and framework of the social history of medicine and, particularly, the history of the disease.

It shows the important role of the training obtained by health professionals in international research centres in the management of both epidemic events, in the modernisation of Spanish science and healthcare before the civil war, and in the post-war reconstruction. Moreover, it highlights the key role of vaccines and sera against the 1918-1919 flu, despite their lack of specificity, and how these specialised healthcare professionals excelled in their production and in proposing a holistic approach to public prophylaxis of infectious diseases. It also shows the positive role of certain doctors in the clinical and epidemiological management of poliomyelitis in 1929 from two health institutions, the result of the modernisation of our scientific healthcare. We also show the negative impact of the civil war, which limited the results achieved by these specialised professionals against poliomyelitis, for which Spain had no local vaccine production. The lack of Spanish political will and our dependence on scholarships and grants from international agencies are also clear.

The main limitations derive from the small number of epidemic phenomena analysed. The novelty of the article lies, on one hand, in the fact that two extremely important viral epidemic events which have so far been analysed separately are examined jointly; and, on the other, because it principally evaluates the role of research visits of health professionals in the management of these crises, also for the first time. In addition, the study allows us to approach the period of Spanish scientific and healthcare modernisation before the civil war and that of subsequent reconstruction after the negative impact of the war, enabling us to see continuities and discontinuities in an extensive time frame, with profound historic, political, socio-economic, and scientific changes, both national and international.