Manuel González Rivera. Promoter of hygiene education in Mexico during the decade of 1940

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Abstract

This article revisits Doctor Manuel González Rivera's work as a promoter of hygiene education in Mexico during the 1940s. From his classroom at the School of Public Health and head of the Hygiene Education Department of the Ministry of Health and Assistance, González Rivera produced an interesting bibliography on the meaning and importance of hygiene education. Based on three of his most important books, Educación Higiénica (Hygiene Education) (1943), Doña Eugenesia y otros personajes. Materiales de educación higiénica popular (Eugenics and other characters. Popular hygiene education materials) (1943) and Enfermedades transmisibles. Cartilla para maestros rurales (Communicable diseases. A booklet for rural teachers) (1944), this article highlights his pedagogical and social work in the design of strategies and tools for health personnel and rural teachers to educate the population in matters of prevention and hygiene habits promotion.

KEY WORDS: Manuel González Rivera. Hygiene education. Health intermediary.

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Resumen

Este artículo rescata la labor del médico Manuel González Rivera como promotor de la educación higiénica en México durante la década de 1940. Desde su aula en la Escuela de Salubridad y como jefe de la Dirección de Educación Higiénica de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, González Rivera produjo una interesante bibliografía sobre el significado e importancia de la educación higiénica. Con base en tres de sus principales libros: Educación Higiénica (1943), Doña Eugenesia y otros personajes. Materiales de educación higiénica popular (1943) y Enfermedades transmisibles. Cartilla para maestros rurales (1944), este artículo destaca su labor pedagógica y social en el diseño de estrategias e insumos para que personal sanitario y maestros rurales educaran a la población en materia de prevención y fomento de hábitos higiénicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Manuel González Rivera. Educación higiénica. Intermediario sanitario.

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Introduction

Physicians of the post-revolutionary Department of Public Health, created in 1917, identified the need for a Hygiene Education and Propaganda Section to disseminate advice on the prevention of diseases and promotion of hygienic habits among the population targeted by the health campaigns implemented after the revolutionary struggle. In 1922, this section started operating and its first director was doctor Ignacio Chavez, who began by dividing the recipient population between children and adults and bringing together actions between the Ministry of Public Education and the Department of Public Health with the purpose to develop a series of pedagogical activities and design educational instruments that were easy to understand for a population that was largely rural and illiterate. Public health propaganda promoted by this Section during the second half of the 1920s and the decade of 1930 was announced quarterly in the Public Health Department Bulletin, in *Gaceta Médica de México*, which published collaborations by doctors Alfonso Pruneda,¹ Miguel Bustamante² and Salvador Bermúdez³ related to the subject. The latter wrote *Elementos de Higiene* (Hygiene Elements) (1933), which combined his notes of the Hygiene class that he taught at the Faculty of Medicine.⁴ This textbook, as the author called it, dedicated only two pages to hygiene education, which was included in the chapter on prophylaxis means and failed to mention the important work of nurses and sanitarian graduates mostly from the School of Public Health, which belonged to the Department of Public Health,⁵ or rural teachers. As we will see next, without relegating doctors, Manuel González Rivera included these professionals and provided them with pedagogical materials to spread hygiene education

A biography under construction

In 1940, Manuel González Rivera was a professor at the School of Public Health, where he taught the subject of Hygiene Education; in 1942 he was the head of the General Directorate of Hygiene Education, but there is little we know about his life and professional career prior to this period.⁶⁻⁸ In the most thorough medical-biographical compendium for the history of medicine in Mexico, *Protagonistas de la medicina científica en México* (Protagonists of scientific medicine in Mexico) (1860-2006), he is not

mentioned.⁹ Neither is he mentioned by *Gaceta Médica de México* or the Department of Public Health Bulletin, only in *Latinismos* was there a short note published, which indicates that he was born in the city of Guanajuato in 1897 and, in the decade of 1920, he obtained his medical degree at the National School of Medicine.¹⁰ Apparently, he returned to his hometown, got married, and moved to the city of Pachuca, Hidalgo. So far, this first stage of his life and trajectory opens more questions than certainties and offers a research path to complete his biography. The clearest evidence of his passage through public health history are his publications and based on three of them, we trace the route that continued under his guardianship, hygiene education in Mexico.

We'll start with *Hygiene Education* (1943), where he quotes North American doctor Thomas S. Wood as a reference on the subject and who highlighted that school spaces were strategic for the dissemination of hygiene education. Gonzalez Rivera stated that Mexican educational scope had not yet reached the necessary coverage due to the carelessness that prevailed in the teaching of hygiene in primary and secondary school. He thought that the authorities did not give the required importance to the subject and that the Department of Public Health, not being an educational institution, could not take full responsibility. He particularly complained about the lack of support of the university spheres and of a program more defined by education authorities. The fact that, 20 years later, González Rivera did not recognize this work announced by his colleague Ignacio Chávez, who headed the Hygiene Education and Propaganda Section, presupposes that he found the efforts made between the Ministry of Public Education and the Department Public Health to be insufficient. Unlike the United States dynamics, which separated the contents for children in the school setting, those for health personnel in their medical-sanitary context and that for adults in a more open scope, this difference was still not clear in Mexico early in the 1940s. While he recognized the importance of each group, he emphasized that the priority were the contents and then their dissemination to specific groups through conferences, radio shows, brochures, newspapers, movies or exhibitions. González Rivera defined hygiene education as:¹¹

Everything that tends to channel and direct the development of man, through the acquisition of knowledge about hygiene and healthiness issues, as a means to induce the

performance of acts and the development of habits that help health preservation and enhancement.

By mentioning “the acquisition of knowledge”, he reinforced the value of the contents as a substantive part in the teaching-learning process on the subject. In the referred book, the author demonstrates his knowledge about history of education in general and of healthiness in particular, as well as his pedagogical and didactic skills to explain how a child or an adult should be taught. By having identified the lack of teaching materials as a limiting factor to promote hygiene education, he decided to revert it and embarked on the task of compiling the *Doña Eugenesia y otros personajes. Materiales de educación higiénica popular* book (1943) (Eugenics and other characters. Popular hygiene education materials). In the first pages, González Rivera¹² explained that the compilation came from works submitted by his students of the Hygiene Education course (1942-1943 school year):

With the tendency of the undersigned towards making the teaching of hygiene education as practical and realistic as possible, we have tried to make students create propaganda and educational materials by themselves; this is how, in class, doctors and nurses have produced stories about hygiene, ballads, song parodies, short phrases, writing of flyers, charades, riddles, etc.

Thus, texts written by more than 25 authors among doctors, nurses and sanitarians parade in this book, where he shares experiences of his work in communities. González Rivera was categorical in stating that if health educators lacked adequate knowledge about the things they should teach, they would ensure the failure of an educational campaign. He also was categorical by printing the book on his own, clarifying the following:¹²

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This way, anyone interested in reproducing any fragment of *Doña Eugenesia y otros personajes. Materiales de educación higiénica popular* was able to do it freely, contributing to expand his dissemination network. The first story is *Doña Eugenesia*, written by González Rivera, who defines her as “the science that studies the laws of generation and inheritance and sets rules for improvement of the human species”. *Doña Eugenesia* and not that “vieja doña Eugenesia” (old Eugenics), as called by one of the “ignorant” protagonists, is the title of a lecture that

the health center doctor would give on the risk of blenorrhagia and syphilis, as well as on ways to prevent them. The young protagonist, Gualupita, was about to marry an irresponsible young, womanizer, alcoholic man and, to make matters worse, sick of blenorrhagia, and, besides, he lied to her about the prenuptial certificate he had to request in a dispensary. After listening to the talk, Gualupita identifies the risk of getting married if the groom would not accept the medical treatment he required and, as it was expected, the wedding was canceled and the attendees to the lecture learned about the risk of this disease.

With a happy ending included, that story defined the structure of others dedicated to prevent other diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, hookworm infection, onchocerciasis, typhoid fever, diphtheria, gastroenteritis and alcoholism. With different natural scenarios, characters (mainly peasants) and diseases, with usual appearance of a sick person who is unaware of his/her condition, a family member who suffers consequences, a healer who recommended ointments and boycotted the doctors’ talks, a midwife who did “dirty” jobs on pregnant women, a doctor, nurse or sanitarian who brought scientific knowledge to the community, fought traditional practices and encouraged hygiene. The set of characters would not have been complete without the rural teacher, who communicated the arrival of health personnel and promoted it. Physical spaces were invariably health clinics or the patient’s home, bars and, occasionally, classrooms. Most stories are framed by poverty and ignorance of the inhabitants, who gradually learned through hygiene education. Another feature is that the authors literally reproduced the peasants’ way of speaking. For example, in “Evil of eye of the louse”,¹³ gastroenteritis was raging among the children’s population, and the mother of a sick child and a neighbor had this conversation:

—Pos míralo: tá malito dende atier tiene unas “vacaciones” muy verdes y apestosas y muchos gómitos. —¿Y ansina te lo trajistes a la calle? —Sí, porque ya lo receté anoche. —¿Lo llevates con el dotor? —No, con ese dotor no; dice doña Secundina que el dotor ese de Salubridá es muy malo, que luego luego va diciendo que no les dé uno de mamar seguido a los niños. (—Just look at him: he’s been sick since the day before yesterday and has had very green and smelly stools and a lot of vomiting. —And you brought him to the street in this conditions? —Yes, because I already prescribed him last night. —Did you take him to the doctor? —No, not to that doctor; Doña Secundina says that that Health Department doctor is very mean, that immediately

he goes on saying that one should not breastfeed the kids so often.)

This form of writing served, according to Gonzalez Rivera, to make people understand more easily the recommendations of the doctors who, when speaking like them, laid a communication bridge whose maximum accomplishment was achieved when the patient or his/her family members attended the health clinic. The riddles or charades turned sanitary advice into a game of memory and fun and at the end of the book the answers were presented. He also wrote stories dedicated to children, where the disease-transmitting agents expressed their concerns. For example, "In the reign of death",¹⁴ written by nurse Raquel Matus Lozano, the protagonists are King Trichocephalus and Queen Ancylostoma, who publicly complain that:

Men are to blame for our misfortune. In my times, they all walked barefoot; the little ones played all the time... But now, men are less foolish, they have built more powerful weapons than we, they have invented covering their feet with some impenetrable things that they call shoes; almost nobody eats anymore with unwashed hands, thus closing another door for us; lastly, the few of us who manage to get in, get killed with some poisons provided to them at Hygiene Centers.

Amid fantastic stories and in realms of disease-carrying insects, a population that assimilated the advice on hygiene education and learned to take care of the carriers of illness makes its appearance. In 'Eugenics and other characters. Popular hygiene education materials', health personnel found teaching material that was also used by rural teachers. Not fully satisfied, González Rivera wrote definitions to identify causes, symptoms and consequences of transmissible diseases.

The primer entitled *Enfermedades transmisibles. Cartilla para maestros Rurales* (Communicable diseases. A primer for rural teachers)¹⁵ was published in 1944 by the Hygiene Education Directorate of the Ministry of Health. A black and white engraving showing a teacher reading to four young people who carefully listen appears on the cover. This picture represents rural teachers as educational intermediaries that already had a new primer that included definitions and concepts applicable to transmissible diseases. Using an epidemiological vocabulary, González Rivera divided it two parts and emphasized its pedagogical nature by establishing, in part one, a simple dialogue to explain the basic knowledge of disease symptoms and ways to prevent

them. It does not explain how to cure, given that this a task that is exclusive of doctors but in the last two chapters it does reminds the teachers about "epidemiology statistics" and "hygiene education in the town", their responsibility for generating reports with data (number of sick people, living conditions), which would help identify, at the national level, the incidence of diseases or urgent health needs. The second part of the primer focused on individual diseases and stated "so that the teacher can adapt his/her behavior to each case and take appropriate measures to prevent the spread of transmissible conditions". With no doubt, it was a useful document for teachers to identify a disease, its origin and its consequences.

Conclusion

Manuel González Rivera's books, analyzed in this manuscript, are proof of his commitment to hygiene education, its contents and the process of dissemination. Health intermediaries had to be provided with materials and involve them in their development, promoting that doctors, nurses and sanitarians were more sensitive to their daily practice. Stories, riddles and short phrases were inspired by daily life of communities and their inhabitants, as well as by the difficulties to make them get involved in health campaigns. At the same time, González Rivera promoted teamwork and involved their students in one of the greatest commitments acquired by post-revolutionary governments, in order to rebuild the so longed country with healthy and working Mexicans. If to the above we add his collaborations in national and international newsletters and his participation as promoter of the Hygiene Museum, opened in 1944¹⁶, we would complete a professional biography of this prominent Mexican doctor.

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