

Call for Papers
ESF Research Networking Program Drug Standards, Standard Drugs
Workshop 17-19 March 2011

Oslo, Norway

Organisers: Christoph Gradmann (Oslo) and Flurin Condrau (Manchester)

Beyond the Magic Bullet: Reframing the History of Antibiotics

Antibiotics have been celebrated as a medical success story around the globe from their first distribution at the end of WWII to the present day. The first available drug of this group, penicillin, its production in different national settings, the establishment of a successful clinical trials regime, the remarkable results in the treatment of infections and its cultural representation shaped public and medical knowledge. As agents of a medical revolution which shifted borders between health and disease and created new spaces for therapy, antibiotics have become one of the most popular scientific success stories of the twentieth century.

Following on from the first meeting held in Madrid in June 2009, this workshop will focus on recent and current research into the histories of antibiotics, which has started to move beyond the initial stories of the discovery of penicillin and the randomised clinical control trials. The workshop's aim is to bring together researchers to discuss antibiotics in different social and cultural domains, and how drug standards have emerged and been subjected to change around the world. As we move away from the conventional heroes accounts, we are particularly interested to bring together scholars working from diverse regions and all continents.

We invite proposals for papers contributing to the four key themes of this workshop:

Research and development of antibiotics

Historiography has hitherto focused on Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin and its subsequent career to mass manufacturing and distribution after World War II. We want to continue the historical investigation into the sustained efforts for research and development of antibiotics. We will need to find out how pharmaceutical companies benefitted from the initial penicillin 'gold-rush'; how regulations in the aftermath of the thalidomide disaster changed the framework and to what extent antibiotics remained a profitable area of drug development beyond the 1950s.

Antibiotics in clinical practice

Among the key issues here is the breakthrough of antibiotics in different fields of clinical practice, namely in the hospital and in general practice. We are particularly interested to understand how antibiotics have helped to tie together diverse settings to allow a therapeutic unity to emerge between the hospital and the general practitioner. Evidence suggests a hugely important role of the commodification of antibiotics, particularly after becoming available in the pill form. We need to understand how the huge market success of antibiotics interplayed with the emerging voice of the patient in health care policies and clinical practice. And, in a global perspective, we are interested

to study the effects of drug regulations in the West and the global dissemination of antibiotics in largely unregulated trajectories.

Antibiotic resistance

It is becoming increasingly clear that resistance is a feature of antibiotics rather than an unintended consequence of their overuse. Here, historians have an important story to tell as they seek to reframe antibiotics: less magic bullet and probably more a temporary solution, not least for hospitals and their problem of infection control. Of course resistance ties together all aspects of the history of antibiotics but we are particularly interested in examining the emerging understanding of resistance as a feature of antibiotics.

Antibiotics as global medicines

The historiography of antibiotics has traditionally focussed on stories located in northern, developed countries. Yet, their application in places such as Africa or parts of Asia that offer differing cultural, legal and institutional frameworks seems to have resulted in very specific phenomena. The notable example is the 'career' of multiple resistant tuberculosis that has arisen as a major challenge to health care systems around the world. We hope to be hearing more such stories that highlight the problem of cultural and technological transfer. What happens when an European or American regime of handling antibiotics is appropriated to a different cultural, technological and regulatory context?

This workshop is organised by the Working Group of Antibiotics within the ESF funded Research Network Program Drug Standards – Standard Drugs (www.drughistory.eu). This group includes researchers from the universities of Manchester, Oslo, Amsterdam, CERMES (Paris) and Madrid. The workshop is organised in cooperation with the Antibiotic Centre for Primary Care at the University of Oslo (www.antibiotikasenteret.no). The conference will be hosted at the Voksenåsen conference centre (www.voksenaasen.no/en/) outside Oslo

Proposals of up to 400 words should be sent to Christoph Gradmann (christoph.gradmann@medisin.uio.no) or Flurin Condrau (f.condrau@manchester.ac.uk) by 15 September 2010. The language of the conference is English. The conference is sponsored by the European Science Foundation and supported by the Antibiotic Centre for Primary Care. Accommodation and travel will be supported.