

The Malta Medical School: 350 years in the making

Charles Savona-Ventura

The founding of the Scuola di Anatomia e Chirurgia within the Valletta Sacra Infermeria in December 1676 stands as a seminal moment in Maltese medical history. Instituted by Grandmaster Nicolas Cottoner and first led by Fra Dr Giuseppe Zammit, the School was created in direct response to the catastrophic 1675–76 plague that decimated the islands' medical workforce and exposed the limits of an apprenticeship-based system of medical education. Its establishment marked the deliberate shift from informal, craft-oriented training to organised, sustained medical instruction anchored within a major clinical institution.

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COVER PICTURE

'A Walk Through Mdina' - Ink and acrylic on paper

Dr Ben Chetcuti is a Maltese psychiatrist and artist. He studied medicine at the University of Malta before completing his postgraduate psychiatric training in Glasgow, and now practises as a consultant psychiatrist in Ayrshire, Scotland. Alongside his medical career, he has continued to develop his artistic practice. Working primarily in ink and acrylic, he draws inspiration from the architecture, history, and atmosphere of the Maltese Islands, creating paintings that celebrate their distinctive character and evoke a sense of place and nostalgia.

Clinical integration and hands-on anatomical work were central to the school's impact. Under successive *lettori*—most notably Gabriele Henin (1723–1753) and Michelangelo Grima (1763–1797)—the curriculum evolved from theoretical lectures to regular public dissections, post-mortems and weekly anatomical demonstrations. The construction of a dissection room and later an anatomical theatre (1716) adjacent to the Casetta delle Donne, the acquisition of anatomical models and instruments, and the creation of a dedicated medical library (original donation by Zammit) equipped Malta with pedagogic resources comparable to contemporary European centres.

Beyond technical instruction, the school fostered a scholarly culture through the *Accademia Medica*—weekly clinical and academic meetings where cases and methods were debated publicly. This promoted clinical observation, post-mortem evidence, and peer review as norms—practices foundational to modern clinical reasoning and patient safety. The school also broadened health workforce education by formalising training pathways for surgeons, apothecaries, midwives and nursing attendants—anticipating later professionalisation of allied health roles.

Institutional consolidation followed: in 1771 the *Scuola* was incorporated into the *Collegio Medico* of the newly established *Pubblica Università di Studi Generali*. This transition enabled degree

granting, structured curricula (botany, chemistry, anatomy, surgery, medicine) and standards for licensure—critical steps that linked Malta's medical education to wider European university systems. Throughout political upheavals—the French interlude of 1798, 19th-century reforms, and two world wars—the school's legacy persisted in successive iterations of Malta's medical faculty and hospitals.

Why this matters today: the *Scuola di Anatomia e Chirurgia* exemplifies how a focused educational response to a public-health crisis can create durable institutional capacity. Its blend of bedside teaching, anatomical science, public case review, and formal certification anticipated key features of contemporary medical education: integrated clinical exposure, evidence-based practice, interprofessional training, and alignment with university standards. As the Faculty of Medicine & Surgery grapples with 21st-century challenges—AI, genomics, constrained clinical resources—the 350-year legacy is a timely reminder that resilient, patient-centred education rooted in rigorous clinical training and scholarly culture remains the surest foundation for future innovation.

The *Scuola's* story is not merely historical commemoration; it is a model of adaptive education: crisis-driven, clinically integrated, and institutionally ambitious – principles we must preserve and renew for the next generations of physicians.