The Contribution of Atanasije Puljo to the World Medical Science
During the Balkan Wars (1912-1913)

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The period of Balkan Wars from 1912 till 1913 has been thoroughly elaborated by most eminent Yugoslav and foreign military physicians participating in those wars. Their papers comprise epidemiological problems and medical staff in the Army, particularly ones working in the prevention field. The papers further disclose experience in war surgery and various subjects concerning the organisation of Medical Corps in the war.

Serbian Medical Corps entered the Balkan Wars in a three armies formation set by King Milan Obrenović in 1886. Because of only few changes in the formation since 1886, Serbia had a certain number of highly skilled military physicians who worked hard on the development of the Medical Corps and on the improvement of general health conditions.

The Medical Corps during the Wars have been working under the circumstances that were more than terrible. Dr Vojislav Subotić, Chief of the Medical Corps during the Wars, later wrote that "The history of war surgery has had not many examples where wounded soldiers had to endure as many difficulties as those ones."

At the beginning of the Serbo-Turkish War in 1912, dr Atanasije Puljo became head of the newly formed Department for Jaw Fractures in the Fifth Reserve Military Hospital in Belgrade, where he has worked during the Serbo-Bulgarian War in 1913, as well.

Dr Atanasije Puljo, in the middle of the Balkan Wars, was the first in our area to advocate the complex treatment of maxillofacial injuries and to heal successfully complex and compound fractures.

Making an evaluation of his work and contribution to the scientific field, especially in maxillofacial traumatology and management of war injuries, it is necessary to emphasize his pioneer endeavour in a complex specialistic treatment of these injuries.

At the departments for jaw fractures in Belgrade and Niš 345 soldiers with heavy gunshot wounds of face and jaws were treated during the Wars, 97% of them having the comminutive bone fractures.

Until this time, both in our country and throughout the world, the wounded men with injuries of face and jaws were treated by general surgeons as the specialistic treatment and therapy of these injuries, in true sense of the word, did not exist. The results of such treatment, therefore, were very bad, with high mortality rate, numerous deformities and disabilities.

Bearing in mind the fact that early and appropriate immobilization of jaw fractures is of enormous importance in management of the face and jaw injuries, Atanasije Puljo came to an idea of joining the efforts of dentists and surgeons in treating those wounds. Such a cooperation happened for the first time just in Serbia during the Balkan Wars. Special teams consisting of a surgeon and a dentist were therefore formed.
During the First World War from 1914 till 1918 all embattled sides had such teams. The American Expedition Corps in Europe, for example, had in 1917 74 teams comprising two surgeons and a dentist in the maxillofacial surgery units. The idea of joint dental and surgical management of maxillofacial war injuries, however, was achieved for the first time in 1912 at the Department for Jaw Fractures of the Fifth Reserve Military Hospital by dr Atanasije Puljo. That was his original contribution to the world medical and dental service, achieved four years before other scientists in the world.

Atanasije Puljo published his experiences in treatment of jaw fractures in our and foreign professional journals. In the "Serbian Archives of General Medicine", founded by the Serbian Medical Association in 1872, he published a report under the title "On the Bone Fractures in Serbo-Turkish and Serbo-Bulgarian Wars (1912-1913)". At the International Congress of Dental Medicine in Paris (1919) he reported "Communication sur le traitement des fractures maxillaires en Serbie (1914-1918)". In his opinion "... when treating jaw fractures, the work of a dentist must go along with the work of a surgeon. Surgeon, alone, cannot treat jaw fractures successfully, as well as the dentist cannot treat them if he does not possess surgical knowledge". Numerous papers of Atanasije Puljo, published prior to and after this one, attracted much interest in world professional circles. His works emphasized the principle of simultaneous surgical and prosthetic management of maxillofacial injuries and, therefore, served as a basis for further development of dental science in this particular field.

Among the Yugoslav university professors, his work was studied by dr Vera Gavrilović, the historian of medicine and by general dr Antonije Škokljev, maxillofacial surgeon.

Dr Atanasije Puljo was born in Zemun in 1878. He graduated medicine in Graz in 1901 and finished his specialization in stomatology in Paris in 1904. Afterwards he has worked as a private dental practitioner in Zemun. At the beginning of the Balkan Wars he joined the Medical Corps and participated in Serbian liberation wars (1912-1918). After the First World War from 1918 till 1922. he was in France where the French wanted to keep him at the University of Nice because of his exceptional professional capabilities. He, however, returned to Belgrade to help his suffering people. In 1932, he founded the Dental Department of the State General Hospital, with certain number of beds for treatment of serious maxillofacial patients.

That same year he published his book "Dental Care". It comprises 28 chapters covering different branches of dental science and has 160 pages with 32 illustrations. The book begins with words: "It is my purpose in this book to disclose, in a clear and conceivable manner, of what importance and value are good and healthy teeth; how to preserve them and, if they are decayed, how to obtain healthy and good teeth again". One of the chapters is dedicated to professional dental terminology, which is of great importance for us since it was the first attempt in our country, made by a dentist, to deal with the problem of this kind. The author explains it by the wish to substitute all foreign words (Latin, German, French) and to find "the appropriate dental terms in our own language".

At his Dental Department of the State General Hospital since 1925 he was the first in Yugoslavia to receive doctors of medicine for specialization in oral and dental diseases.
Until then medical doctors could specialize the subject only in other countries, most often in Graz, Vienna, Paris and Berlin.

The Clinic for Odontostomatolgy at the Medical School of Belgrade University was founded by the Ministry of Education order in 1936. First head of the Clinic was dr Atanasije Puljo as a University professor for the Oral and Dental Diseases subject. He was a pioneer in oral roentgenographic examination. In 1912 he used roentgenograms as an aid for establishing diagnoses.

He died in a traffic accident in 1944 only a couple of days after liberation of Belgrade. As a doctor and a humanitarian, Atanasije Puljo made a great contribution to our medical and dental science. From the seed he had planted in 1923 and in 1936 originated Belgrade University School of Dental Medicine, founded in 1948 as the first one in Yugoslavia.