

Constantinos Michael (1751–1816): 19th Century Doctor and Medical Philosopher

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: During the 18th and 19th centuries, many books about science were published. Constantinos Michael (1751–1816), the first medical historian to write in Greek, contributed to this literature. Born in Kastoria, Greece, Constantinos Michael lived and studied medicine and philosophy in Vienna. His book *Dietetics* describes how lifestyle and diet can benefit or harm human health. Though not well known, Constantinos Michael made substantial contributions to medical scholarship and the promotion of Greek history and Hellenic culture, as described in this study. This is the first such study of Constantinos Michael and his medical treatise, *Dietetics*.

Keywords: dietetics, Greek Enlightenment, concise history of medicine.

INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the 18th century, at the start of the Modern Greek Enlightenment, the publishing of books about science significantly increased, resulting in the diffusion of knowledge throughout the

Hellenic region. Physicians and other practitioners participated in this rejuvenation of Hellenism, contributing to the enhancement of national education by transferring their medical knowledge into various books and publications. Constantinos Michael (1751–1816) was a notable doctor and author of two books from this era.

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Constantinos Michael was born in Kastoria, Greece, in 1751, and attended basic education lessons with Michael Papageorgiou (1727–1796) of Siatista, Greece. Later, he studied philosophy and medicine at the Academy of Vienna (1, 2). Although many details about his life and studies are unclear, some letters written by him are dated 1779, when he was 28 years old. In the epigram of a book by Thomas Demetriou of Siatista, Greece, Constantinos Michael is characterized as "very scholarly", though it is unclear whether he was a medical student at that time. Later, at the age of 34, Constantinos Michael translated and printed the book *Handbook by Someone Very Wise Among Medical Doctors* while still a medical student (3).

Constantinos Michael likely acquired his medical degree in 1794, the same year that he published *Dietetics* and the *Concise History of Medicine* using money from a "friendly expenditure". The necessity of this expenditure suggests that his professional medical work was not yet satisfactory enough to fund his own book publishing. Throughout his scholarly life, Constantinos Michael studied ancient Greek, Latin, German and French languages. He recalls attending a medical practice lesson given by Professor Maximilian Stoll, who died in 1787. He lived in Vienna, where he practiced medicine and where he died on the 27th of November 1816. As a doctor, historian, and philosopher, Constantinos Michael is among the most esteemed scholars of the Modern Greek Enlightenment.

Dietetics

Dietetics, considered the first medical book written in Greek, was published in Vienna, in 1794, during the Modern Greek Enlightenment (Figure 1). It was republished twice in 1809 and 1819. In the introduction of the book, Constantinos Michael explained that he was inspired to write it because there was nothing similar offered in "our own dialect" (i.e., Greek) and he wanted to assist his "beloved" nation. He explained how he collected information from the "elder glorious medical doctors" and "the modern ones" to write the book, adding his own observations from his "common life" as a doctor. *Dietetics* is written in a "humble style", avoiding the "much vulgar" approach "used by many," which he considered "disgusting and graceless". Notably, he used an archaistic style in his inscrip-

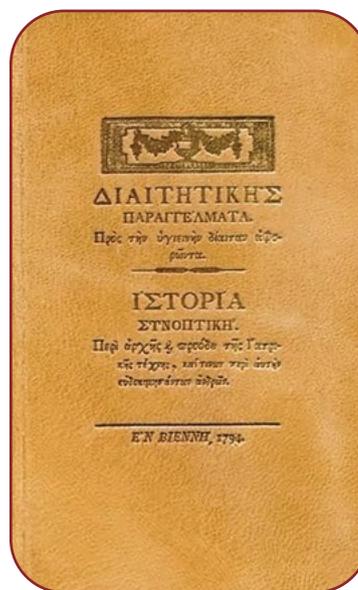


FIGURE 1. Constantinos Michael, *Dietetics*, Vienna 1794

tion to the medical doctor Baron Antoin de Stoerck.

The prologue of *Dietetics* notes that it is intended to be "a concise premonition pertaining to the progress of medicine as well as to certain men who flourished in this area", which "would be beneficial to the book's readers". He adds "certain few details in the maximum conciseness possible". These details occupy one third of the book. Constantinos Michael also notes the value of *Dietetics* for the "preservation and conservation of health".

The book includes a "Concise History of Medicine" (pp. 1–136) and "Dietetic Commands" for health (pp. 137–437). The historical information has 35 pages covering the beginning of medicine, when various societies of "diligent and educated" humans observed the attributes and effects of herbs to assess their benefits and contraindications and which extrinsic stimuli could provoke responses and reactions in humans. This research represents the early acquisition of medical information and scholarship (4). The latter half of the medical history covers Greek medical doctors of antiquity, including various medical schools (i.e., heresies) created by Greek medical doctors, such as the Logical, Dogmatic, Empirical, Methodic and Eclectic schools. Constantinos Michael stresses that "by merging medicine with wisdom, they raised it to the level of a sublime art". These Greek practitioners, he notes, were great men of medicine who made significant contributions to the advance-

ment and progress of the field. He emphasizes the word Hellas, which has a geographic and national relevance (5). In doing so, Constantinos Michael celebrates his heritage and national pride while also encouraging his fellow Greeks to follow their ancestors' examples (6).

Next, he covers the contributions of Arabic medicine and Arab medical doctors. He notes that after the "Fall" of "our Reign" over the Queen of Cities (Constantinople) in the 15th century, scholars fled to the West, where they translated "many books of the elder philosophers... into the Latin idiom" and corrected "badly and erroneously translated" texts (6). The last 19 pages of the *History of Medicine* refer to famous doctors of Europe in the 16th to 18th centuries who set the foundations of modern medical science, referring to the famous Dutch medical doctor Hermann Boerhaave as the "second Hippocrates of the present century". The bibliographic references in this section include ancient Greek and Latin writers, as well as his contemporaries.

The Dietetic Commands discuss ways to "overcome the human limit" and avoid harm using air, sleep, food, drink, motion, and rest, as well as "passions of the soul" (1). There are references to "evacuations of excreta" of the body, such as faeces, saliva, sweat and seed, and if they are "going along in a right manner and order" for health benefits. The various uses of baths, phlebotomy, and cathartics also are memorialized. The 46 bibliographic references include ancient classical writers, such as Homer, Hippocrates, Galen, Aristotle, Herodotus, Theophrastus, Diogenes Laërtius, Strabo, Tertullian, Celsus, Pliny, Athenodorus and Plutarch. Curiously, the bibliographic references for the Dietetic Commands omits John Peter Frank (1745–1821), a famous

medical doctor and organiser of the Medical Academy of Vienna and author of the seminal four-volume work, *System of an Entire Medical Police* (1786-1790), which covers various public health topics from conjugal relations to school hygiene. □

CONCLUSION

Constantinos Michael is considered the author of the first history of medicine written and published in Greek (7). Although *Dietetics* was republished in 1809 and 1819, later Greek scholars omitted it from their historical accounts. Nevertheless, its coverage of the evolution of medicine and discussions on the great medical doctors of each era are important contributions to the early medical literature. In 1837, Anastassios Georgiadis became the first professor of the History of Medicine at the newly founded University of Athens.

Thanks to the pioneering efforts of Constantinos Michael in the 19th century, during the first period of the Modern Greek Enlightenment, the scholarship and contribution of Hellenic practitioners and physicians are known today. Constantine Michael wrote two of the 12 medical books published during this era. His treatise **Dietetics** was published in Vienna in 1794 and became popular throughout Europe, particularly in Greece. Nikolaos Louros, in 1971, quotes great passages without changing his meaning. Konstantinos Michael was a prominent figure and scholar of the Modern Greek Enlightenment. □

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