

The Village of Vieiras: a 1895 report of a typhoid fever epidemics in rural Brazil

In the month of February of 1895, the rural village of Vieiras, Province of Minas Gerais, Brazil, was the scenery of a dramatic epidemics identified then as typhoid fever. A commissioned pharmacist named Francisco de Paula Machado de Castro was sent to the village by the Province government, charged with the heavy responsibility to fight the disease and treat the population. Castro stayed there during the whole epidemics and produced a full report on the situation found in the village, describing the progress and the treatment of the disease, and its effectiveness for the 117 infected individuals. He presented the statistics of sickness recovery and mortality by sex and age indications, limited mostly to adult/child categories. However, as a trained technician and out of pure scientific curiosity, he recorded his observations on the sanitary conditions of the village, interpreting them either as disease determinants or aggravation factors, at the light of the most advanced scientific knowledge available at that time and location. In this article, it is argued that he performed reasonably well a role equivalent to that of a modern social investigator, detailing and analyzing the material resources of the villagers, including relevant variables as climate, housing, daily and seasonal diet, occupation, wages and labor conditions, economical background as well as human and medical resources available to them, in an attempt to associate those variables with the disease outbreak and progress.

Contemporary epidemiology researchers like Jose Luis Bobadilla and Cristina Possas argue that the causes of long term changes in the epidemiological profiles of human populations are not yet clearly understood. However, a review of the literature on the subject suggests that changes in the standards of living, life styles, access and quality of health services and nutrition account for most of the improvements in survival in contemporary societies. In this sense, however specific for only one small village, the Castro report may help enlighten some of these issues, from the qualified point of view of a health agent of his time, graduated at the prestigious “Escola de Pharmacia de Ouro Preto”, founded in 1833. Thus, the purpose of this article is to perform a case study, analyzing the Castro report under the argument that it may be considered as representative of the late 19th century’s scientific thought and analytical skills of the health technical agents responsible for the making and

application of the health public policies, having as theoretical background the scientific knowledge and resources available locally and in the Province of Minas Gerais, in a period generally accepted as consistent with the epidemiological transition period in Brazil. As additional data sources, the author used some relevant administrative and demographic information from the 19th century series of the Bi-annual Reports of the Presidency of the Province of Minas Gerais, from the administrative years of 1855 to 1890.