

## Letter to the Editor

**The centenary of academic leagues in Brazil: a brief reflection***O centenário das ligas acadêmicas no Brasil: uma breve reflexão*

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In our country, few events or organizations stand the test of time. Centenaries are rare and reserved for those which manage to shape themselves to the demands of the society of each time. Our democracy is not that old, neither is our health care system. We haven't even used antibiotics for that long. There are also scarce educational institutions that have such a far-reaching and prolific history.

The academic leagues, which this year (2020) celebrate their first centenary, arose in a different Brazil. A Brazil that had just laid the foundations of its republican regime, was shaping itself to face health challenges, such as smallpox, yellow fever, tuberculosis, typhoid, leprosy and sexually transmitted infections, and did not have a health system or social security system dedicated to workers<sup>1</sup>.

The League for Combating Syphilis (LCS: *Liga de Combate à Sífilis*, in Portuguese), the first representative league, was born into a revolutionary scenario under

the command of the late syphilographer Aguiar Pupo<sup>2,3</sup>. According to professor Octávio Armínio Germek, also a leader of the league, the shutdown of the regular syphilis treatment service center in São Paulo justified its creation by the Academic Center "Oswaldo Cruz" on August 29, 1920<sup>3</sup>.

The syphilitic treatment centers were taken over by the league, where, at a time that seems so far from ours, infections caused by *Treponema pallidum* were microscopically diagnosed and treated with arsenobenzoyl injections. In two decades, this initiative treated more than 20,000 patients<sup>4,5,6</sup>.

LCS was not limited to therapeutic activities. It took charge of the prevention of venereal diseases as one of its major goals, giving "lectures and conferences of an educational and prophylactic purpose" inside and outside the scientific academia. In a report by the also imminent professor Sylvio Marone, the concern to produce accessible

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educational material for all audiences is highlighted<sup>2</sup>.

The success of the first academic league reverberated and bore fruit mainly during the military dictatorship, when the number of leagues across the country boomed. During this period, they were committed to improving knowledge, complementing official education and, moreover, bringing the scientific academia closer to the community<sup>7,8</sup>.

Although there is no precise report on the number of academic leagues in Brazil, they play a remarkable role in academic training. Along with their expansion, their very definition also changed as a result of shifts that Brazilian medical education has undergone. Nowadays, academic leagues can be defined as spaces that gather academicians in pursuit of creating a social bond, having contact with new technologies, improving knowledge and complementing official education, based on the three pillars of higher education: teaching, research and extension. Therefore, they represent spaces for health promotion, social transformation, building of critical sense skills and scientific reasoning<sup>8-11</sup>.

These entities not only carry out theoretical and practical activities, such as theoretical classes, courses, analysis and discussion of scientific articles and clinical cases, but also hold scientific events, hospital and ambulatory internships, social and extension projects:

Nevertheless, this profusion of activities may also represent negative effects, such as excessive use of students' free time and illegal exercise of the profession. In addition, they can also make room for perpetuation of addictions and early specialization. Often, the large number of activities may also keep the students away from the fields of research and extension. In this deleterious process, some leagues are reduced to mere curricular tasks to be fulfilled<sup>8-11</sup>.

The celebration of this centenary might lead to a reflection on the future of our leagues. As a guarantee of survival, these associations need to keep adapting over time. In our view, they need to incorporate new technologies, regulate activities, establish themselves as communicators on social networks. The leagues of the next century must keep in touch with the population by modern means, be part of social networks and, thus, make themselves perceived in the public debate.

The prodigality of the leagues for reaching a centenary must be acknowledged. Else, a hundred years open a path. A new century of challenges is ahead. How will our leagues build on it? We don't know that. We indeed should follow the example of LCS, which remains active and promoting health under the new name "Academic League to Combat Syphilis and other STIs". Overcoming ostracism, that is the challenge!

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