

Through the lense of the hospital discharge report: a novel approach to the history of medicine?

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Nowadays, the discharge report is a fundamental document for hospital functioning, for justifying costs to insurance companies, and for sharing medical information among colleagues and/or with the patient. This outcome is the result of the evolution of medical correspondence during the 20th century, from simple doctor-to-doctor communication to the development of a technical and standardized document. Moreover, as the discharge report became established in medical relationships, it accompanied various phenomena such as the institutionalization of hospitals, the development of medical specialties, the implementation of social insurance, and communication with patients.

Thanks to two hospital archives (Diakonissen-/Gemeindespital Basel/Riehen, 1928–1950 and Lausanne, CHUV, 1950–2000), it is possible to delve into an unprecedented history of medical correspondence in Switzerland. By engaging with these reports, we propose an exploratory approach that highlights the actors involved, shows the stakes that bind them together, and presenting the linguistic and epistemic aspects the discharge report conveys. Our presentation will be divided into two parts.

Tom will present sources coming from the Diakonissen-/Gemeindespital Basel/Riehen. Reflecting on the administrative climate of hospital organisation during the early 20th century within which the discharge report made its appearance, he will trace the first steps of the discharge reporting system. By doing so, he proposes an analysis of knowledge circulation between the patient file, the discharge report, and the referring physician.

The Vaudois sources, presented by Jasmine, will highlight the emergence of a new medical specialization – neonatology - at the Hôpital Cantonal in Lausanne in the latter half of the 20th century. To do so, she will examine the specialized neonatal terminology used in the reports and the relationship between the different actors (doctors, patients, insurance companies when applicable).

Since the sources come from different hospitals, different cantons, and different linguistic areas, it will also be possible to identify the differences and similarities of discharge reports based on local hospital practices.