



History, whatever for?

Historia ¿para qué?

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That is the title of a book published in 1980. In it, a group of historians and writers of the time answer the question: Whatever for is history useful? The question was raised by authorities of the Archivo General de la Nación (General Archives of the Nation). The book with answers was formatted as a series of essays integrated into one single text. It was published in order to substantiate the need to preserve the nation's historical archives in a building that had previously harbored the Lecumberri jail for many years. The building had been conditioned to receive the several tons of documents which constitute the memory of our country. These documents constitute the fundamental basis for the reconstruction, analysis and diffusion of our history.

In the 10 essays contained in the book, the authors encompass different aspects, visions and approaches on the subject of the use, legitimacy and need for history. Luis Villoro, in his text called «El sentido de la historia» (The Meaning of History) expresses the following: «History obeys a general interest in knowledge, because it fulfills the function of helping us to understand the present.... It would seem that, if we were not to refer to a past with which to connect our present, this present would become incomprehensible, gratuitous and senseless». In the essay titled: «History, whatever for?» the author, Carlos Pereyra pointed out the following: «Those who participate in the makings of the present history will be placed in a better perspective to intervene in their time proportionately to the understanding of its origin.»

These concepts are perfectly applicable to the field of dentistry, which can be better understood when its origins and developments are known. The last decades have seen an increasing interest in the history of dentistry in our country. History of dentistry is now included in the study plans of an increasing number of institutions. This subject has been taught for over 30 years at the National School of Dentistry, National University of Mexico (UNAM), sometimes as an elective subject, and of late, as a seminary

taught at the tenth semester of the dental career. The creation of a History Department and the Hall of Mexican Dentistry has been paramount in order to establish a permanent dialogue with our past. With the study of this subject, the field of humanities is thus incorporated to the professional life of the dentist, bringing him in this fashion undeniable wealth.

On February 18th of the present year, the joint project of the School of Dentistry with two other Schools of the UNAM finally crystallized. This project was the creation of a diploma course on the «History of Dentistry, its ethical and philosophical aspects as well as prospective vision». The course entailed 120 class-hours taught in 30 sessions. It counted with five modules, the first and second were taught by professors of the School of Philosophy and Literature, the third module was taught by the Department of History of the School of Medicine, and the two last modules were taught by specialists in history of dentistry, almost all of them being professors at the National School of Dentistry. The diploma is aimed at dentists, physicians, historians, and in general, to people with a university degree who are interested in the subject. Upon completion of this diploma course, the attendant will have achieved a panoramic perspective on dental treatments undertaken in ancient times; on the birth and professionalization of dentistry, on the reasons and circumstances which prompted dentistry to diverge from medicine and assume a separate life and finally, on the relationships of dentistry with health sciences.

By means of this diploma course, it is of great consequence for our institution to build communication bridges as well as strengthen academic ties with the

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Schools of Philosophy and Literature, core of the UNAM, and the School of Medicine, which is already so related to our career. Fruition will arrive soon.

Therefore, to the initial question of «whatever for is history useful to a dentist?» we can answer with one

sentence: It is useful to better understand who we are, it is useful to become better dentists.

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