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History of the Foundation of Psychosomatic and Social Medicine

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The Student,
the Patient
and the Illness

Ascona Balint
Award Essays

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Since 1968 general practitioners, clinic doctors, university staff and medical students have met for International Seminars at the historical “Monte Verità” (the mountain of truth) in Ascona/Switzerland. These seminars were intended to enrich medical training and consisted mainly of Balint work, a reflection on the doctor-patient-relationship in a group setting. Students became part of the team and university lecturers also participated.

Today the “Monte Verità” is a conference centre for advanced education, which is a part of the famous ETH University of Zurich.

Boris Luban-Plozza (1923–2002) was a Swiss family doctor in the region of Tessin/Switzerland. In 1961 he invited Michael Balint (1896–1970) to Grono/Switzerland for a lecture. Before he had read Balint’s book *The Doctor, his Patient and the Illness* (translated into German and published 1957 by Ernst Klett Verlag, Stuttgart). Luban-Plozza describes his meeting with Balint’s ideas and with him personally as a turning point in his life and medical career. “All real life is encounter.”

And it was Boris Luban-Plozza, who in 1968 started the Balint meetings of Ascona. He was the inaugurator of the “Ascona-Model”, which had a big influence on the young generation of doctors and students and is well known in Europe. The “Ascona-Model” supported the principles of a relationship-oriented education in how to be a doctor. It is a teaching and a learning model for students and it demonstrates how to understand the doctor-patient relationship in an empathetic narrative- and process-based mode and as well how to understand evidence-based medicine.

The Balint Award for students of medicine is part of this concept. The Award was founded in 1976 in honor of Michael Balint (1896–1970).

The Award was given to medical students every year at the Ascona meeting with one exception: at Balint’s 100th birthday in 1996 the conference

and ceremony was held in Budapest, the city where Michael Balint was born.

In 1992 a sponsor gave a splendid sum of money for the Ascona Model and the “Fondazione Medicina Psicosomatica e Sociale – Stiftung Psychosomatik und Sozialmedizin” (Foundation of Psychosomatic and Social Medicine) was founded and supports the Ascona Award for students since then. The board members of the foundation take care of the goals.

After Boris Luban-Plozza’s passing in 2002 the Foundation and the International Balint Federation (IBF) decided to dedicate the Ascona Award together.

The International Balint Federation (IBF) consists of 26 national Balint Societies today. The organization has the goal to spread Balint’s ideas of improving the relationship between doctor and patient by group work, where professionals sit together and try to understand their influence on diagnoses and treatment and the emotional input of doctor and patient.

The IBF organizes an International Balint Congress every second year. In 2003 at the International Congress in Berlin/Germany, the Ascona Student Prize winners were invited for the first time to take part in the groups and lectures and to present their papers in front of the participants. It was a great success. The Student Prize winners have been invited to the International Balint Congresses since.

The Foundation for Psychosomatic and Social Medicine and the International Balint Federation continue to hold the Balint-Award-Ascona competition for essays by students in which they report and reflect on their personal experience of encounters and relationships with patients. Sometimes these encounters date from the very beginning of their medical studies. They are asked to include a detailed description of the first meeting with the patient. This is to be followed by a theoretical analysis and a personal reflection on what it meant for the writer. Some students have also included the presentation of their work in Balint groups, in which they discuss the student-patient-relationship with their peers.

The papers of the students from all over the world are extraordinary essays and illustrations of their progress in becoming a “good enough doctor” (D.W. Winnicott: “the good enough mother”)¹.

In his lecture at the last Balint Award Ceremony June 15th, 2002 in Ascona (*Balint-Journal*, 2003, 4[4], 19–20) Arthur Trenkel, the president

1 Winnicott, D.W. (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34, 89–97.

of the jury at that time, summarized what was important for him and his fellow jurors: "In an overall view the papers reflect a kind of painting of the spirit of the age from the students' perspective. This year a strong accent seems to lay on the critical view of the increasing common instrumentalization of human beings caused by reduction to simple roles or functions. In the hospitals especially the patients and doctors are affected by this collusion of anonymity. The students while practicing in the hospital stay so to say 'between the chairs' which grant them welcome opportunities for independent perceptions on another level."

The criteria by which the papers will be judged are as follows:

1. Exposition: The paper should include a presentation of a truly personal experience of a student-patient relationship. (Manuscripts of former medical theses or diplomas cannot be accepted.)
2. Reflection: A description of how the student experienced this relationship, either individually or as part of the medical team.
3. Action: The student's own perception of the demands to which s/he felt exposed and an illustration of how s/he responded.
4. Progression: A discussion of both ways in which the student's own approach might change in the future, and also possible ways in which future medical training might enhance the state of awareness for individual students.