

A Potosinian woman in the surgery, midwifery and teaching of the first half of the twentieth century

Una mujer potosina en la cirugía, partería y docencia de la primera mitad del siglo XX

Bertha Minerva Acevedo-Oliva,* Carlos Agustín Rodríguez-Paz,**
Guillermo Enrique Stevens-Amaro***

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* Full Professor in Public Health, Universidad Cuauhtémoc Medical School at San Luis Potosí, SLP, Mexico. Ex-Coordinator of the Public Health Delegation of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS). San Luis Potosí, SLP, México.

** Full Professor of Morphology and Surgery, Universidad Cuauhtémoc Medical School at San Luis Potosí, SLP, Mexico. General Surgeon, General Regional Hospital, 50th Delegational Zone, IMSS, San Luis Potosí, SLP, México.

*** Full Professor, History of Medicine, Universidad Cuauhtémoc Medical School at San Luis Potosí, SLP, Mexico.

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ABSTRACT

The biography of Dr. María de Jesús Uresti Leija (1900-1987) is described, who began her professional life as a midwife at the age of 20, according to the study plan of the early twentieth century. She was the fourth medical graduate at the then Scientific and Literary Institute of San Luis Potosí. She developed an extraordinary surgical activity, being the first woman in the state of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, to perform trauma, orthopedics and gastric surgery, among others, like former war surgeons. She was part of the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Dentistry of the Autonomous University of San Luis Potosí, among other institutions. She also practiced private medicine. For her many facets and dynamism, she is remembered by several generations of students trained by her and patients she saved, remaining as a symbol in the transition of the Porfirian Mexico when she began as a graduate midwife, then transforming herself into a surgeon and university professor.

RESUMEN

Se describe la biografía de la Dra. María de Jesús Uresti Leija (1900-1987), quien inició su vida profesional como partera a los 20 años de edad, de acuerdo con el plan de estudios de inicios del siglo XX. Fue la cuarta médica graduada en el entonces Instituto Científico y Literario de San Luis Potosí; desarrolló una actividad quirúrgica extraordinaria, siendo la primera mujer en el estado de San Luis Potosí, México, en realizar procedimientos de trauma, ortopedia y cirugía gástrica, entre otros, como los antiguos cirujanos de guerra. Formó parte del cuerpo docente de la Facultad de Medicina y de la Facultad de Odontología de la Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, entre otras instituciones. Asimismo, ejerció la medicina privada. Por sus múltiples facetas y su dinamismo es recordada por varias generaciones de alumnos que formó y pacientes que salvó, permaneciendo como un símbolo en la transición del México del porfiriato al iniciarse como partera graduada, transformándose en cirujana y profesora universitaria.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. María de Jesús Uresti Leija was born on May 15th, 1900 in Angostura, San Luis Potosí (SLP), daughter of Cipriano Uresti and Eusebia Leija and the eldest of seven siblings (Figure 1). At that time marriage was usual between 14 and 17 years of age. During that time, in the frame of the Porfirian medicine directed by Dr. Eduardo Liceaga,¹ one of the last epidemics of bubonic plague erupted in Mexico between December 1901 and March 1902, that left 582 deaths.² At the time of

the birth of our character, Dr. Otero y Arce discovered, in 1906, that the louse was the vector of the plague, for which he was not been given credit.³ The recognition was not corroborated in those years. In Mexico, prior to the Mexican Revolution, the census registered 15,160,000 inhabitants.⁴

MIDWIFERY IN SAN LUIS POTOSI

The midwifery profession was given an official character by recommendations of His Majesty Carlos III, who ordered that in his domains an

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education system for women called midwives be implemented, through training through the so-called primers.⁵ Courses were held at the National School of Medicine in the mid-19th century in order to professionalize the guild.⁶

Towards January 1863, this implementation was already regulated in our state, as in article 39 of the Fundamental Law of Public Instruction, where the bases for the exercise of professions were established. The said article describes that “midwives will study those notions of obstetrics that do not require very advanced knowledge of anatomy and will present a professional examination when they obtain the practice according to the judgment of the respective professor, without this meaning authorization to practice the great operations that such science encompasses or for the administration of medicines.”⁷ Midwives were trained in a department called obstetrics in the wards of the Civil Hospital at the end of the 19th century.⁸ Upon graduation they received the degree of Delivery Teacher (Figure 2).

In 1915, the then student Uresti Leija began her midwifery studies at the Miguel Otero Hospital, where the old Civil Hospital resumed activities,⁹ after being closed for political rather than health decisions.¹⁰ She



Figure 1: Uresti-Leija family, Dra. Uresti in her mother's arms.



Figure 2: Midwives' graduation at UASLP in 1920. The then pupil María de Jesús Uresti (signaled with an arrow). Participate in the ceremony teachers Asunción Arredondo de Eguiluz y Díaz de León, both in dark dress.

graduated in midwifery in 1920, with her studies being recognized by the Scientific and Literary Institute of San Luis Potosi. In 1922, midwives took care of the newborn, always supervised by doctors, who did not directly attend the delivery. The midwives themselves carried out newborn care activities and hygiene measures.

THE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL WORLD IN 1920

During the preparation on midwifery of the then student Uresti, in addition to the struggles of the Mexican Revolution and the medical actions of the armies in conflict to save hundreds of lives,¹¹ a series of epidemics took place, that decreased the number of inhabitants, perhaps more than the bullets and cannon shots of the revolution (Figure 3). During 1915 a plague epidemic broke out; the treatment was to “de-louse” the patients, implementing actions such as bathing the infested. 190 thousand came to be bathed in these actions.

From 1918 to 1920 the state of San Luis Potosi was affected by the Spanish influenza pandemic.¹² In the votive Figure 3, people who give thanks are seen, facing the Christ who performed the miracle, while the guards isolate the patients. This illustration is interesting because of the way patients are divided, with a separation between them.

GRADUATION AND MEDICAL LIFE OF DR. URESTÍ

In 1924, Dr. Uresti began a career in medicine, perhaps to perfect her medical knowledge and continue working at the Civil Hospital of San Luis Potosi. In 1929 he obtained the title of Medical Surgeon and Midwife; the course was passed by majority, not by unanimity (some of the examiners did not agree to pass a woman). She then requested a second professional exam and was unanimously accredited. Her title was signed by Gral. Saturnino Cedillo.¹³

SURGICAL PRACTICE

Dr. Uresti's surgical instruction was under the mentorship of Dr. Jose Mendez Macias (a Potosinian surgeon who did a fellowship in Paris with Naturist Georges Pouchet, 1833-1894, and who was also director of anatomic dissection), who initially was his surgery professor and later proposed the young doctor to be his assistant in surgery, whereby she received the influence of the French school. This does not exempt the teacher's self-taught preparation by reading works such as the *Tice and Ireland Medicine Practice Compendium*.¹⁴

Given the confidence and affection she aroused among the population since she was a midwife, she continued to work at the Civil Hospital, now as a doctor, and initiated and cultivated her private practice. At the end of the construction of the modern hospital in our capital in 1945, Dr. Uresti became staff at the Morones Prieto Central Hospital.¹⁵ Sure



Figure 3: Exvoto illustrating how patients were managed during the influenza epidemic of 1918-1920.



Figure 4: Anatomy class at the Faculty of Medicine, Autonomous University of San Luis Potosi around the 50s of the Twentieth Century; an arrow signals Teacher Dr. Uresti (center) describing the cadaver.

spirited, she always agreed to visit the sick at their homes, with a gun in her bag, a gift from a known politician (as a gratitude gesture for a successfully performed surgery on him).

Dr. Uresti developed a special ability for gastric surgical procedures such as stabbing and gunshot wounds or eventual closed-trauma injuries due to vehicle accidents that began then to be common. She was always required to repair injuries from abdominal trauma, orthopedics and neurosurgery, among others, skills acquired by her consistency in reading European books, and by their practice with cadavers in anatomy classes at the university.

Drs. Adolfo Cardona, Alcocer Andalón and Uresti were the staff surgeons of the Central Hospital of San Luis Potosi around 1970.¹⁵ Doctors only worked during the morning shift, and when she was required at night, she was sent an ambulance to pick her up at her home, and she attended after hours. She practiced all areas of surgery (obstetrics,⁸ orthopedics, general,¹⁵ digestive, etc.).

TEACHING ACTIVITY

She integrated as a staff teacher of the School of Medicine, in the Chair of Anatomy (*Figure 4*), and developed the practical program to perform autopsies for students. Dozens of generations learned from her hands.¹⁶ At this time she perfected her surgical skills, which allowed her to perform from the most practiced

procedures of gastro-surgery, to trephines, orthopedic, and thoracic surgery but, most especially, urgent trauma surgeries, most often with magnificent results and with her ethical vision of attending the injured at any time of the day, as Desault.¹⁷ She also taught at the School of Dentistry of the Autonomous University of San Luis Potosi, where she joined the topographic anatomy class.¹⁸ She taught the advanced biology class at the preparatory school of our state and she is recognized not only as a teacher, but as a benefactor, since she applied Larrey's principle of covering the expenses of those students who could not afford their career, and bought them books.

In 1952 she continued as a professor of topographic anatomy at the School of Medicine. Along with her activities as a general surgeon, it was commented that because of her status as a woman, the most difficult cases were assigned to her, and that she performed them successfully. As a surgeon, she was the only one working at SLP until 1980. One of the operating rooms at the Central Hospital is now named after her.

END OF A PRODUCTIVE LIFE

In 1977, after 70 years of professorship, 33 years of performing general surgery at the Central Hospital, midwifery at the Miguel Otero Hospital, attending physician at the Red Cross and staff of private hospitals, she was appointed Dean of Professors. She was one of the few professionals of the University of San Luis Potosi to hold two university degrees (medical and midwifery) before 1970.¹⁹ In the end, she was left with no pension for retirement from any institution, since at that time no such systems existed. She retired because of old age, with the unfortunate oblivion of her companions, but not of her patients.

She died in the city of Tampico, in 1987, due to complications of Alzheimer's disease, without any financial or academic recognition. The only tribute was made 100 years after her birth by the Association of Potosinian Medical Women in 2000, on the occasion of the Doctor's Day, and a commemorative plaque was placed in the operating room of the Central Hospital of the city of San Luis Potosi.

Unlike the initiators of the medical movement in our country, like Dra. Matilde Montoya (1852-1938),²⁰ Catalina Olivo Villarreal (1887-1978),²¹ Herminia Franco Espinoza (1891-1988),²² who exercised obstetrics exclusively, because of the limitations women had, and the predilection of female patients to be examined by other women,²³ we can consider Dr. Maria de Jesus Urestí as the first woman who performed orthopedic and general surgery¹⁵ in our country. It will remain as a matter of debate, in the rest of our nation, to search for the leaders in other cities of Mexico. Meyran-García and Neri-Vela describe in their work some female doctors as part of the staff of the surgical pavilions at the General Hospital of Mexico between 1906 and 1912 (Dr. Elvira Santoyo Halsey and Pilar Manzano), but do not describe whether they performed surgeries.²⁴ Who did conducted procedures in general surgery was Dr. Irene Talamas at the pavilion of Dr. Dario Fernandez Fierro, between 1943 and 1947,²⁵⁻²⁷ but well after the era of our surgeon-midwife. Teacher and doctor Maria de Jesus Uresti is an example in surgery, of those who opened the way to the era of the 1970s and onwards, characterized by the inclusion of women in the labor markets of our country.²⁸

Conflicts of interest: There are no conflicts of interests, since this work does not refer to any pharmaceutical product and is not linked to any current political current.

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Correspondence:**Bertha Minerva Acevedo-Oliva**

Tel: 44 4829 2963

E-mail: minervaol@yahoo.com.mx