

“A Test of Conscience”: The emotional dimensions of medical education, Mexico 1935-1940

In 1935, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) established a program for medical students known as the *servicio medico-social*. It was a social service program that required students to spend a period of approximately six months doing medical service in a rural Mexican village. The SMS was seen by educators and state public health officials alike to be an ideal way to provide a low-cost, low-footprint curative to the persistent problem of physician distribution in Mexico, while inculcating a spirit of civic mindedness among the nation’s future physicians.

But how did individual students experience this intense time away from the comforts of Mexico City? In this paper, instead of recapitulating an institutional history that has already been told—namely, the growth of public health institutions in post-Revolutionary Mexico—I want to describe the emotional dimensions of medical education and professionalization in the lives of individual students. Using work in the history of emotions as an analytical guide, I argue that the SMS represented an emotional tool in the process of professionalization. I argue that bearing witness to the suffering of others served as a road marker within medical students’ lives—defining an emotional border between layman and healer, a border often defined by legalistic language of privileges and responsibilities. Voices from student theses and records from UNAM show that, for many, the SMS represented a key moment of personal change that transformed not merely how students behaved as new professionals, but how students felt about their newly-minted professional status.

Keywords: Medicine, Medical education, rural health, indigenous health, history of emotions.

Technology needs: Laptop/projector for PowerPoint presentation.

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