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## A history of medicine

### Saint Valentine: Patron of lovers and epilepsy



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#### ABSTRACT

St. Valentine of Terni a third-century Roman saint was known as the patron saint of lovers. He had the reputation of healing the sick and is said to have restored the sight of Julia the daughter of Asterius his jailer. Valentine had been imprisoned for secretly marrying couples disobeying the edict of roman Emperor Claudius II. The edict forbade roman soldiers to marry for it was thought marriage would diminish their efficiency in the battlefield. Asterius converted to Christianity after his daughter was healed. Valentine and Asterius were beheaded by order of Emperor Claudius II. Before his execution on February 14, 271 AD. Valentine wrote a love letter to Julia signed "from your Valentine" giving rise to the celebration of St. Valentine's Day. But St. Valentine's role as the patron saint of epilepsy is less widely known, for epilepsy was defined as an incurable disease thought of as a supernatural event such as a curse or a possession by an evil spirit. Since there was no cure for epilepsy healing was only possible by divine intervention and saints were called upon to intercede for these patients. While Valentine is widely known as the patron of lovers, very few people know he also was helpful and beneficent to people with epilepsy in ancient times.

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#### San Valentín: patrón de los enamorados y epilepsia

#### RESUMEN

San Valentín de Terni, un santo romano del siglo tercero, fue conocido como el patrono de los enamorados. Se dice que tenía el don de curar y sanó la ceguera de Julia la hija de Asterio, su carcelero. Valentín había sido encarcelado por celebrar matrimonios en secreto desobedeciendo el edicto promulgado por el emperador romano Claudio II. El edicto prohibía que los soldados romanos se casaran porque se pensaba que el vínculo del matrimonio disminuía su eficacia en el campo de batalla. Asterio adoptó la fe cristiana después de la curación de su hija. Valentín y Asterio fueron decapitados por orden de Claudio. Antes de su ejecución el 14 de febrero del año 271 a. C. le escribió una carta de amor a Julia en la que firmó «de tu Valentín» y dio origen a la celebración del Día de San Valentín. Pero el papel como patrono de la epilepsia es menos conocido, pues era definida como una enfermedad

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incurable asociada con eventos sobrenaturales como una maldición o a la posesión por un espíritu maligno. Puesto que no existía una curación, la única alternativa con que contaban quienes sufrían epilepsia era una intervención divina y se les pedía a los santos que intercedieran por ellos. Mientras que se conoce ampliamente a Valentín como el patrono de los enamorados, muy pocos saben, que también ayudó y benefició a los pacientes epilépticos en la antigüedad.

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## Introduction

As it is true of many saints and relevant figures in Christianity, there are a number of myths regarding the existence of Saint Valentine. While it is believed by many that there was a man called Valentine who favored the fate of lovers and of epileptic patients, many others think that he was not in fact real and his life was merely a historical tool for worship and reverence.

In Europe, two different men were granted the title of St. Valentine. Valentine de Terni and Valentine de Raethia. For this review, we have focused on the life of Valentine de Terni, who seems a more likely candidate to be the historical figure known today (Krugel).

## The Saint

Roman emperor Claudius II, circa 260 AD, forbade roman soldiers to marry, for he considered that wedlock would severely diminish their efficiency, strength and lack of mercy in the battlefield. It was then, that a catholic priest, later known as Saint Valentine conducted wedding ceremonies in secret.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, he was arrested and thrown in prison by Emperor Claudius II. He was put under vigilance of prefect Asterius, director of the confine who had challenged Valentine before regarding his alleged healing powers. Asterius, a ruthless man, requested Valentine to restore the gift of sight to his daughter, Julia, who was born a blind girl. Valentine placed his hands over her eyes, prayed to God, and Julia was able to see. Asterius, in awe of Valentine's power converted to Christianity, along with 46 members of his family. He then also freed all Christians who were confined in his prison. The emperor, aware of what had happened, ordered Valentine and Asterius to be beheaded. The penalty was probably executed, on February 14, 271 AD.<sup>2</sup>

Sometime before his execution, Valentine wrote a letter signed "from your Valentine", saying goodbye to Julia, the daughter of Asterius with whom he had fallen in love. This would become the first record in history of a "Valentine's Day letter".<sup>3</sup>

He was buried in Rome near the Via Flaminia. Christians exhumed his body and moved it to the city of Terni and he would then become the patron saint of this city. A basilica was built in Terni dedicated to St. Valentine. His remains still lay there.<sup>1</sup>

Over two hundred years later, in 495 AD, in order to censor and undermine the unholy festivities of love and fertility

called "Lupercalia", celebrated by Roman pagans, Pope Gelasius I, commuted the people of Rome to a celebration in honor of Saint Valentine, for Lupercalia had been celebrated since long before Christianity and, as its name suggests, was a very harsh event. Little by little the pagan gathering was suppressed and the celebration in honor of the saint took its rise.<sup>4</sup>

The legend of Saint Valentine made him the patron saint of lovers, and forever made February 14, the day of his death, as the day to celebrate romance and love.

## Valentine and epilepsy

For many centuries, epilepsy was thought to be an incurable disease, and was seen as the consequence of a curse or the result of a possession by demons. A dramatic situation as such, often described as a "terrible spectacle that could only have a supernatural origin". Since there was no cure, remedy or essence for it, the only option epileptic people had, was turning to faith, and putting their hope to be healed in the hands of the saints.

Religion and medicine have been intertwined throughout history. Monasteries were the main medical centers before 1300 AD. Like so, there are so many saints and images and religious practitioners linked to all kinds of ailments and diseases, especially chronic illnesses.<sup>5</sup>

There are almost 40 saints associated with epilepsy, a number only surpassed by those related with the black plague.<sup>6</sup> In France they were called *saints convulsionnaires* (convulsion saints). During the middle ages the difference between epilepsy and chorea was not well known yet. This is how St. Vitus became one of the saints to which patients with epilepsy prayed more often for help. Epileptic people also sought the help of St. Willibrord, St. John the Baptist and St. Matthew. But undoubtedly, the most renowned was Valentine. The cult began in several European countries, up to the point that this condition became linked with the saint's name. In France it was denominated *maladie de Saint Valentin*, in Germany the "plague of Saint Valentine and in Dutch the word *sintvelten* was a synonym of epilepsy.<sup>7,8</sup> In German, Valentine is pronounced "fallentin" and is connected with one of the denominations of epilepsy, the falling sickness or the falling-down disease.<sup>4,9,10</sup>

A chapel was erected in the village of Rufach in Alsace with relics of the saint. This spot became a place of pilgrimage and a hospital was built in the fifteenth century to house the pilgrims who came from different places looking for a miracle to control the disease.<sup>7,11</sup>

Further evidence of Saint Valentine's place as the patron saint of epilepsy, can be found in a myriad of illustrations from various time periods and churches around the world. Some of these convey the search for supernatural healing, others portrayed Valentine conducting exorcisms, and scaring demons away from epileptic patients.

In a study conducted by Kluger et al., 341 illustrations dating from the 13th century up to the 21st century were systematically analyzed. These sculptures and paintings depict Saint Valentine assisting people who suffer from epilepsy in various manners. He often appeared surrounded by men and women of all ages and social levels, including the elderly. There are different clinical presentations of what we know today as epilepsy portrayed in the illustrations, such as, tonic and atonic seizures, dystonia, infantile spasms, absences and postictal states.<sup>12</sup>

Lucas Granach, a German painter, made a wooden carved sculpture in 1509 of Valentine which is currently exhibited in the Bavarian State Library in Munich. He portrays a young epileptic man with a dramatic expression on his face, shortly after being cured or, exorcised.<sup>9</sup>

Another related painting of St. Valentine belongs to the art collection of the Franciscan monastery in Klanjec, part of the Krapina Zagorje district of northern Croatia. In a 1675 painting artist George Geigerfeld shows a pictorial representation of St. Valentine as the Bishop of Umbría Italy standing surrounded by sick or epileptic children. Valentine is dressed in a bright gown with gold details surrounded by epileptic children who lay on the floor. In his hands, he has a book and a palm branch, a symbol of suffering. The children appearing in this work of art are shown as having characteristic ocular movements and postures of epilepsy. In this portrait, Valentine's eyes are looking up toward heaven as a symbol of being the intermediary between the infirm and God.<sup>5</sup>

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### Closing remarks

The authors wish to highlight the important role played by St. Valentine as the patron saint of epilepsy and pledge

homage to him for his much underestimated help to these patients. While St. Valentine is widely known as the patron saint of lovers and is celebrated around the world on February 14, very few people, including doctors, know he also was helpful and beneficent to people with epilepsy in ancient times.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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