Thesis - hunters in Greece: The end of a bloody black period for Greek Medicine

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The PhD Thesis has been a painful topic for thousands of medical doctors in Greece. Generally, it may represent a dream of life, a step for an academically oriented career, a tool to improve a CV, or an organised program in order to experience actively the medical research. It may also be an extra qualification for finding a job, since the medical degree is almost useless in countries with too many medical graduates, including Greece. All the above described, were impossible for an enormous number of medical doctors in Greece, during the past decade (and before that period, also). The reason is that in order to become a PhD student one should have been involved in regional corporate elites, irrelevantly from his qualifications and his CV.

At the duration of a doctor’s career, the acquaintances are a dynamic and evolving situation, thus we have seen the phenomenon that some doctors in advanced age managed eventually to start and finish successfully a PhD Thesis, because in that age they had accomplished the mission to find help from some professor. Of course, entrusting someone with a doctoral thesis, had the character of transaction, since often persons who had managed to make a thesis had with some way served a professor. Don’t you imagine that they had offered money, or they had sold a parcel to the professors in half from its real price. The means were secret and such secrets will never be revealed in a ground-breaking way. PhD Thesis was the first step from a dark process of transaction, and only a few people outside the elites know how many corresponding steps existed, that led a person upwards.

The last years, dramatic changes have transformed radically the landscape for the candidate doctors, because numerous postgraduate programs have been established, that are delimited by official legislative documents, and in some way they “protect” the PhD students. Today Greece is “stuffed” with an incredible number of PhD students, this of course does not mean that all these candidates will finish some day their Thesis. On the contrary, if some official statistical data were available to the public, it would be known that the proportion of the candidates who successfully finish their doctorate is small. In fact, it is suspectably small. We see therefore that the present situation is evidently better concerning the past but once again the postgraduate programs do not promote the production of PhD doctors, just the celebrating of starting a Thesis one day is interrupted.

Obstacles in finishing the PhD thesis

From the moment the three-member mentoring committee is fixed, the composition of committee may also mean the end of Thesis. That is to say, it has been reported, within expected secrecy, that one or more from the members of committee not only do not support and guide the candidate but can permanently prevent him/her in each distinguishable phase of the Thesis preparation period. Because of these obstacles, a lot of candidate doctors abandon willingly their effort or delay so much that due to the University regulations they lose the right to continue, in the end. This phenomenon does not come from the evil instincts of the mentoring committee members, but is genuine indifference comprised with lack of qualifications for mentorship. Mentorship is not an easy task for the academic staff. However, we see that several of them are mentoring more than 10-15 candidates simultaneously. This of course leads to a “Titanic Scenario”, but interestingly no one is bothered by this massive workload of the mentor, who continues the same “model of mentorship” for many consequent years, without any problem/control. Is this a random misfortune, a kind of negligence, or a planned in advance crime? Somebodies of the 20 candidates finish successfully the doctoral thesis, who from all finish however? Are they the “privileged of the past”? Is this period the same bloody black period dressed in white?

Funding for the doctoral thesis; Then and now

As it was previously reported, a minimal proportion of medical graduates completed the PhD Thesis in the past. They usually were self-sponsored or family-sponsored researchers who could pay for the expenses needed for their doctoral thesis. Without organized facilities of research, and while having to pay for each one of the people involved in the PhD process, things were difficult to work out. A lot of fortunes were wasted in foolish experiments, by candidates who were struggling with themselves to acquire some data and conclusions. Lack of mentorship was a problem of the past and of present. Funding for research was not enough in the past, and is not enough currently, too. With such a large number of candidate doctors that is rapidly growing, research financing will certainly be not sufficient in the following years, too. If combined with lack of mentorship, funding may be enough reason for the PhD Thesis failure. However, if we should choose between the two factors, mentorship is more
important than funding, since an experienced mentor can reduce the cost for a PhD Thesis, by designing a grounded protocol and with the use of low cost reagents and other laboratory kits, with the use of statistics to reduce the number of needed animals for experiments, etc.

PhD Thesis with payment
More recently, certain Universities established several postgraduate programs followed by a PhD Thesis with payment. This change is promising, since informal payment has been a method of the past in our country, not accessible to anybody however. The payment for a doctoral thesis, approximately 8000 Euros, may remove the existing obstacles. The way through paid education will at least offer the access to PhD for candidates who do not belong to the kin of professors, even if they have to work for many many years, in order to collect the money needed.

Current Financing Bank Lending Policies and Time-Preserving Strategies
Given the fact that neither the secret and humiliating patterns of the past, nor the present Legislation protects the candidate from this kind of racism, money may be the final and successful transformation for completing eventually a Thesis without obstacles. It is currently very easy in Greece to receive a loan, with very low interest rate and long duration of settlement. In fact, it is better to pay and secure your time and efforts - since time for scientists is often more valuable than money - especially if you wish to pursue an academic career, than to play with your mental health and break your spine to imitate the PhD "achievers" of the past.

Promotion of research and PhD thesis: What is moral and what is not?
After all the above, who remembers that PhD Thesis is a way to experience research in an organised way and be involved actively in experimental medicine procedures? How many wish to make a PhD Thesis because they love research and wish to learn and be taught about every step of such a procedure? The problem is not limited in the thinking of every candidate: The secret transactions of the past do not belong to the history of mystery any more. Every student knows that if he/she wants to make plans for an academic career, no legislation exists in practice, and things are flexible. It is logical thinking that if PhD Thesis will be done with payment by the candidate, poor candidates are in this way marginalized and excluded. Here, we should emphasize that if someone receives a loan that will be paid in 15 years time, the monthly dose of payment is affordable. For example, to find 1200 Euros annually seems not so difficult, for almost every PhD student. Not for all however, and this is a problem, that remains to be solved in the future.

Money versus corporate elites
This new period for PhD candidates practically offers the chance to start and complete a PhD Thesis without having to lose time while attempting to be accepted into hard-core elites. It is more moral to be based on a loan and pay to make a PhD Thesis, than to marry the daughter of a Professor in order to get access to an academic career. Dozens of romantic stories with MDs, who married daughters of Professors in order to pursue their dreams, are known even to students, who are watching everything and are affected by every-

thing. Rare but reported, some of the above "achievers" took a divorce after taking a position as academic staff in a University. While some others divorced their "non-supporting" wives and married women from the kin of professors in order to start a PhD and complete it in "secure environment". Having all the above in mind, I do think that it is not immoral to pay in order to start a PhD Thesis and have a real mentor who will support you and help you to finish it. Money is a way to buy products and services and mentorship is a kind of service either we like it or not. Mentorship means many many hours of studying and teaching, many hours in the laboratory or for supporting the candidate. No one can imagine how one mentor can guide 10-20 candidates simultaneously: if one mentor has to monitor the candidate's work on a regular basis. And if Universities are autonomous and have thousands of regulations, it is for many many decades a common secret that PhD Thesis is the privilege of the academic staff family circle, a national tradition ( or not?) that is eventually changing.

PhD Thesis as a qualification for a position in the National System of Health
The choice process for the appointment of doctors for the National System of Health has also been a popular painful story. For the majority of medical specialties, the mean age to sign a 5-year contract of paid medical specialist- if ever happens- in the National System of Health, is 45 years old, if you do not have "someone to help you", while you have received the title of medical specialist at your 32 years. This means that many candidates wait for more than 10 years in order to find a job in the National System of Health. Within the six previous years, there has been the "opportunity" of signing an 1-year contract for young medical specialists (up to 5 years after graduation): you work with the title of a "medical assistant", which is rather humiliating in practice, and not at all financially beneficial, because half of your income is paid for your - every year new- house (they prefer you travel to various rural Hospitals). This has made the PhD Thesis also a job qualification and it is not academically oriented title in Greece, any more: the competition is so fierce among applicants, that some of them are too overloaded in qualifications, no matter they are rejected repeatedly! To support their final choice, the responsible Committees do not hesitate to support that the rejected- but qualified applicants are liars or mentally ill. The number of the everywhere-applicants is large and is rapidly increasing due to the intense problem of unemployment in Greece. The "everywhere- applicants" do not know whether they wish to pursue a career in academically oriented Medicine or in the National System of Health.

Quality of a PhD Thesis in Greece
It has been questioned by many authors if any PhD Thesis should have the same value worldwide. Of course, there are many ways to evaluate a PhD and this is not the focus of the present editorial. Unfortunately, the highest amount of energy spent for the PhD Thesis that has been made in Greece, by a candidate that is not "supported", is spent on the psychologic stress that is severe and constant during the years of the thesis preparation. These people usually suffer so much to eventually reach to their target, that they are admirable: unfortunately, they sometimes lose their
dignity trying to keep things intact. Such a stressful period, would anyone think that is full of scientific concerns, but instead of that, it is full of artificial obstacles that make a person either abandon the efforts or lose autonomy of thinking and speaking. Such a humiliation to be experienced, in fact costs much more than 8000 Euros (or not?). It could be described as the Odyssey, with Ithaca reflecting the PhD Thesis. Silence and fear.

**Hopeful on tomorrow?**

At this period of time, Greece is "stuffed" with PhD candidates. This is very very good. Because if for example, sexual abuse was not a minor proportion but a 5%, the reaction of abused people and of society would be stronger and more reactive. Thus, the large volume of candidates is also a very good sign for the tomorrow's expectations. It is not so easy to throw the candidate in the rubbish bin, as in the past. Nowadays, the PhD candidates are a large and noticeable population. Moreover, TV and newspapers are now "power beasts": many would be interested to hear painful stories of abandoned PhD candidates. Also, the establishment of private Medical Schools is approaching in Greece. Money will beat corporate elites, the Banks will be making better and better offers for postgraduate studies financing, the PhD candidates will become even more, and empower the "out-of-circle-population" to the limits.

We should be hopeful about tomorrow. Free PhDs are not useful, if they are available to selected persons only, and it is a pity that all taxed members of society pay for the "in-circle-inhabitants". Only money and crowded Universities can break this network of silence throughout Greece, and can promote medical research in national level.