

The history of the Serbian Medical Society from 1872 to 2025

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Abstract

The first idea to establish a Medical Society that would bring together all doctors of the Principality of Serbia and which would publish its own journal stemmed from Dr. Aćim Medović (1859). Dr. Vladan Đorđević with fourteen colleagues founded the Serbian Medical Society (SMS) in 1872, which has been publishing the journal *Serbian Archives of Medicine* since 1874. In accordance with the goals proclaimed in the "Constitution of the Serbian Medical Society", the work of the Society was mainly limited to the continuing education of doctors. Practically, until the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, SMS was the only place where doctors could acquire new knowledge in all fields of medicine. The Serbian Medical Society has actively participated in the foundation of the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade (1920), the Ministry of Public Health (1918), the Serbian Medical Chamber (1921), and the School of Dental Medicine in Belgrade (1948). The first specialist sections within SMS were established during the period between the two world wars. After World War II, a larger number of specialist sections and branches were established. Today, the Serbian Medical Society has 62 sections, 47 branches, and around 15 thousand active members. The Academy of Medical Sciences also operates within the Society.

Key words founders; sections; branches; journal; academy

Introduction

By hatt-i humayun of Sultan Mahmud II in 1830, Serbia was granted the right to establish health institutions ("freedom to establish ... hospitals ...") and to take care of the health of its population itself. "Taking advantage of this opportunity without delay, and after a short transitional period, Serbia embarked on a rapid rise that gave rise to the most beautiful hopes. (...) In such circumstances it is easy to believe that healthcare was not far behind. It developed from the people and their needs, gradually but incessantly, so that after a couple of years it gained trust of European countries..."¹ The work of Prince Miloš Obradović, who showed great interest in the health care of the people went in several directions, and one of the most important was attracting trained doctors to work in Serbia. Serbia entered the 19th century with no doctors and no hospitals. The first graduated doctors in restored Serbia were the Greek Konstantin Alexandridi (who came to Serbia in 1819), Dr. Vito Romita, Dr. Silvestro Bartolomeo Cuniberti, Dr. Jovan Stejić, Dr. Karol Pacek, Dr. Emmerich Lindenmayer². Among the first doctors there were also Dr. Maksim Nikolić Miškovićev, Dr. Carlo Belloni, Dr. Joachim Medowicz (Aćim Medović)³. Until 1855, when Stevan Milosavljević was promoted to doctor of medicine, all doctors in Serbia were foreigners.

The first initiatives to establish a society that would gather all doctors in the Principality of Serbia date back to the middle of the 19th century. Dr. Aćim Medović, the head

of the Medical Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs,⁴ published an article in *Novine srbske* on April 18, 1859 (for the period up to 1919, all dates in this paper are given according to the Julian calendar) in which he expressed the hope that the medical administration would be able to "unite all doctors in our country into one medical society, which would – if not printed, then at least written – write medical chronicles, in which experiences acquired in specific cases of illness, in judicial matters, in the state of health of the population would be collected, so that the famous observations of individual doctors would become useful for all their comrades, and so that they could be preserved from oblivion and saved for science in general"⁵. The expectations of Dr. Aćim Medović were not met kindly because that year there were only 25 doctors of medicine, five masters of surgery, and five patrons of surgery working in Serbia, most of whom were foreigners. Approximately ten years later (1868) Dr. Aćim Medović and Dr. Jovan Valenta fruitlessly propose the foundation of a medical society.

The foundation of the Serbian Medical Society

Thanks to the commitment of Dr. Vladan Đorđević, the Serbian Medical Society (SMS) was founded in 1872. It is unknown when the initiative to establish a medical society was launched, but it was most likely done by Dr. Đorđević immediately upon his arrival in Belgrade in 1871. The founding of the Society was made difficult, in



Figure 1. Aćim Medović (1815–1893)
Source: 150 years of the Serbian Medical Society,
Belgrade: Serbian Medical Society, 2022

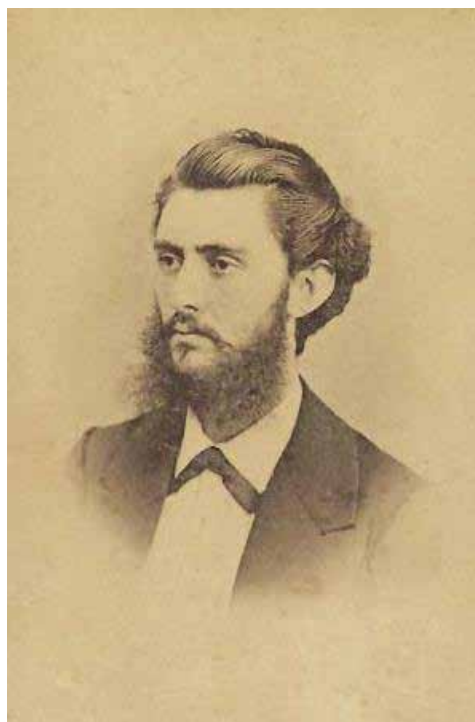


Figure 2 Vladan Đorđević (1844–1930)
Source: 150 years of the Serbian Medical Society,
Belgrade: Serbian Medical Society, 2022

addition to the fierce rivalry that reigned in the medical class, by the small number of “native” doctors. Vladan Đorđević noted in 1872 that “the number of Serbian doctors was so small that they could be counted on one’s fingers, and still there would not be one for every finger”⁶. In a speech given at the celebration of the Society’s Fiftieth Anniversary, he would recall this difficulty: At the founding of the SMS, I found myself compelled to call upon even the service of a humble dental technician [Ilija Ranimir – author’s note], and to fashion of him a physician, if only that our company might number one more”⁷. An added burden lay in the great, and oftentimes insurmountable, differences amongst the physicians “in their lineage and native soil, in the schools of medicine wherein they had been formed, and in the very principles of life in which they had been nurtured”⁷.

On April 21, 1872, several Belgrade doctors published the following advertisement in the newspaper *Jedinstvo*: “A lively need was felt that a **medical society** be established in our midst; and hereby are all gentlemen physicians practicing in Belgrade, who would desire the founding of such a society, invited to a gathering to be held on Saturday, the 22nd of this month, in the Reading Room of the Citizens’ Casino, at five o’clock in the afternoon”⁸.

“Before we take leave of the year 1872, it behooves us to recall that on April 22 of that year Dr. Vladan convened all the physicians of Belgrade in the Citizens’ Casino, where he set forth to them the need of founding the Serbian Medical Society”⁹. At the “First Preliminary Meeting”, Dr. Jovan Valenta informed the attendees about the intentions of the convener of the meeting and the usefulness of establishing such a society, and the main participants in the discussion regarding the proposal to establish a medical society were Dr. Aćim Medović, Petar Ostojić, and Đorđe Klinkovski. In addition

to those mentioned and Dr. Vladan Đorđević, others who attended the “First Preliminary Meeting” included doctors Josef Holec, Carlo Belloni, Sava Petrović, Jan Mašin (Jovan Mašin), Panayotis Papakostopoulos, Bernhard Brüll, Julius Lenk, Marko Polak, and a dentist Ilija Ranimir. At this meeting, the decision was made to establish the Serbian Medical Society. A temporary board was elected, and Vladan Đorđević and Jovan Valenta were appointed to write *The Constitution* of the newly founded Society¹⁰. Dr. Vladan Đorđević, in his speech delivered on the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of SMS, emphasized that “the love of Belgrade physicians for this land and its people” was stronger than all their differences, and that “the yearning for mutual advancement in science outweighed personal sympathies and antipathies,”⁷ a spirit which made possible the founding of the Serbian Medical Society.

The Constitution was adopted at the “Sixth Preliminary Meeting.” At the same meeting, a delegation was appointed (Aćim Medović, Jovan Mašin, and Bernhard Brüll) to submit the Letter of Intent and the “Constitution of the Serbian Medical Society” to the Minister of Internal Affairs¹¹.

In *Srpske novine*, the official gazette of the Principality, on July 25, 1872, the “Constitution of the Serbian Medical Society” was published. The Minister of Internal Affairs [Radivoje Milojković] approved this constitution of the Serbian Medical Society, with his act of June 8, „1872 SN^o 944”¹².

The newspaper *Jedinstvo* published an unsigned editorial on the front page, emphasizing that with the establishment of the Serbian Medical Society, the people and the state gained “an institution which, in its importance, surpasses many of our establishments and associations.” Enumerating the aims of the newly founded Society, the editorialist emphasized that it would labor “in all matters touching upon the fostering of public health” and the advancement of the medical profession. At the close of



Figure 3. Founders of the Serbian Medical Society
Source: 150 years of the Serbian Medical Society, Belgrade: Serbian Medical Society, 2022



Figure 4. Letter in which Belgrade doctors addressed the Minister of Internal Affairs on May 27, 1872, asking him to allow them to establish the Serbian Medical Society

the article, he hailed the “Serbian medical fellowship,” confident that “the Serbian people have thereby gained a source which will bestow upon our nation its most precious possession: health”¹³.

The first SMS Board consisted of Dr. Aćim Medović (President), Dr. Jovan Mašin (Vice-President), Dr. Vladan Đorđević (Secretary) and Dr. Petar Ostojić (Deputy Secretary and Treasurer).

At the first meetings of the Society, a decision was made to launch an expert journal, *Serbian Archives of Medicine*. The first issue of the magazine was published in 1874. *The Serbian Archives of Medicine*, after the *Chronicle of Matiča Srpska*, is the oldest extant Serbian periodical (its issues appearing every year save only those under occupation during the World Wars), and at the same time the oldest scholarly and expert journal in our country.

At the time of the founding of the Society, 63 doctors were working in Serbia, seven of whom were masters of surgery and one dentist. At the end of the first year, the Serbian Medical Society had 49 members: 18 regular (from Belgrade), 30 corresponding (from rural areas) and one honorary (a state statistician, Vladimir Jakšić).

In a letter addressed to Valtazar Bogišić on November 27, 1872, Vladan Đorđević writes with a noticeable dose of desperation, “I founded a medical society. They barely sanctioned our survival. There is no mention of any help”¹⁴. In the spring of the following year, 1873, Dr. Vladan Đorđević was appointed as the personal physician to the Prince Milan Obrenović, “and his favor was transferred to the Society. Based on that favor, the SMS received help from both the Ruler and the state”¹⁵. The material position of the Society improved thanks to the financial aid that the Prince provided to the Society (100 imperial ducats per year) and the decision of the National Assembly to print the *Serbian Archives of Medicine* at the expense of the state.

The First Statute (Constitution) of the Serbian Medical Society

“The Constitution of the Serbian Medical Society” included 30 articles that regulated the goals of the Society, the means for goals achieving, membership, rights and duties of members, election of officers, the manner of conducting activities (meetings), and management of social property¹⁵.

In this paper, we will pay special attention to Article 1 of *The Constitution* (I. On the social purpose); Article 2. (II On the means for performing social tasks) and Article 19. (V. On meetings and what is done at them).

By its first Article, the Serbian Medical Society defines as one of its foremost aims to study the development of the entirety of medical science and of those natural sciences “which serve it as auxiliaries,” so that, by following medical achievements, its members might continually improve themselves; disseminate acquired knowledge “through written and oral communications of their own and others’ experiences”; and to tend to “advance the Serbian scientific terminology in the medical sciences”. The Serbian Medical Society was constituted as a scientific society, not as a guild. Monitoring of the latest developments in the field of medical sciences was deter-

mined as the most important goal.

At the solemn session celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of SMS, its founder, Dr. Vladan Đorđević, stated: “The Serbian Medical Society... created, even before the University and the Serbian Royal Academy of Sciences, a Serbian hearth for science. The Serbian Medical Society has continuously and zealously followed the development of the entirety of medical sciences and of those branches of natural sciences which serve it as auxiliaries; it has progressed with the gradual advancement of medicine, improved itself through its own experience, and has disseminated that experience through written and oral communications”¹⁷.

Throughout its entire history, the Serbian Medical Society has not abandoned this principle, as is attested by the current Statute of SMS, adopted at the Assembly held in 2018. By Article 4 of this *Statute*, the aims of the Society are defined as “the preservation of the historical achievements of Serbian healthcare and care for them, the fostering of ethical and moral principles in the practice of medicine, the advancement of the medical profession and science for the safeguarding of public health, the education and training of health professionals and all societal actors involved in the implementation of health policy, and the protection of the personal and ethical integrity of the members of the Society” (emphasis added by the authors). At the Assembly of SMS held on February 6, 2025, upon the proposal of the President of SMS, Prof. Dr. Milan A. Nedeljković, a decision was adopted whereby, through an amendment of the *Statute*, the Serbian Medical Society is formally defined as a **scientific society**.

Among the goals established by the first “Constitution of the Serbian Medical Society,” there is also a provision on the development of Serbian medical terminology. We note that in the first proposal for the founding of a medical society, in the year 1859, Dr. Aćim Medović pointed out that “scientific anatomical terms should be determined in the Serbian language, which would thereafter be collected and officially provided to all physicians for their use”¹⁵. Dr. Aćim Medović’s advocacy for the formation of a unified anatomical, or more broadly, medical terminology arose from the fact that, in the Principality of Serbia, the practicing physicians have completed their studies at various European medical centers, and thus wrote reports employing diverse terms brought from their studies, thereby creating confusion in mutual communication.

The means used by the Society to achieve its goals are defined in Article 2 of *The Constitution*: oral communications (papers) submitted at Society meetings, collection of books and journals in the field of medicine (creation of the Society’s library), “literary and scientific work”, “acquisition of anatomical and patho-anatomical samples”. If we draw a parallel with the current SMS *Statute*, we will find that similar tools are used to achieve the goals. Nowadays, the Society organizes scientific and expert meetings that serve the professional development of doctors and dentists, pharmacists, biochemists, and other healthcare workers and associates (Articles 4 and 12.). The Society has its own museum and library (Article 26). The Society publishes scientific journals, collections, monographs, and other publications (Article 22).



Figure 5. The home of the Serbian Medical Society

By the decision of the SMS Presidency from May 4, 2007, the Museum of Serbian Medicine of SMS was integrated into the Museum of Science and Technology, which in April 2010 took over the Museum's fund and the SMS Library. The members of the SMS Assembly at the session held on February 6, 2025, unanimously accepted the proposal of the President of the Society to initiate the procedure of returning the Museum and Library to the patronage of the Serbian Medical Society.

Article 19 of the SMS *Constitution* defines the dynamics and contents of regular and special meetings of the Society. At the regular meetings, reports were presented on matters pertaining to the Society's aims, on the epidemic diseases then prevailing in the Principality, "on the constant characteristics of certain illnesses, on rare cases significant for diagnosis and therapy... all new and important developments in the literature of the entire medical science and its auxiliaries were reviewed..."

In his address at the celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Society, Dr. Vladan Đorđević laid special emphasis on the following: "Not a single branch of the medical sciences has remained untouched or undiscussed within the Serbian Medical Society. At its 820 scientific sessions, the Society has heard 1829 oral and written reports, examined more than a thousand operated upon or otherwise significant patients, and has conducted 224 scientific discussions and 379 scientific lectures"⁷.

The Constitution also stipulates that an annual meeting is held every year at which new members and officers of the Society for the following year are elected.

Of exceptional importance for the development of the Serbian Medical Society was its 32nd Annual Assembly, held on January 30, 1905. At this gathering it was resolved that the Statute be replaced by "Rules," which contained the following provisions: (a) that the Serbian Medical Society should unite all physicians in Serbia into a single organized body; (b) that the Serbian Medical Society should elect the members of the Supreme Sanitary Council and propose candidates for the Supreme Educational Council, for the Central Sanitary Administration, for delegates to congresses, etc., as well as to take part and initiative in the drafting of the Sanitary Law and in all matters

pertaining to the sanitary profession; (c) that a "Fund for the Assistance of Impoverished Physicians, their Widows and Orphans" be established; (d) that a Governing Board of the Society be formed; and (e) that a Court of Honor be instituted. By the "Rules of SMS" of 1905, the Serbian Medical Society became the representative body of the entire medical estate of Serbia.¹⁶

Members of the Serbian Medical Society participated in all the wars that were fought during the 19th and early 20th centuries for the liberation of Serbian lands and their annexation to the homeland. The Society suffered its heaviest loss in the Great War, when it lost 128 members, who died or were killed during the war. The first medical casualty was Dr. Josif Anđelković, who was killed by a shell on August 4, 1914, at Cer while providing aid to a wounded Serbian soldier. At the Commemorative Session of the Serbian Medical Society, held on November 20, 1919, the President of the Society, Dr. Đoka J. Nikolić, among other things, spoke as follows: "In vain do our eyes today seek among the ranks of the old acquaintances – they are not there, we see them not. We shall find them among those who have rendered their lives to the Fatherland. When the reckoning of the fallen and the surviving began, it became evident that the medical profession held the foremost place among the fallen."

In the period between the two wars, the Serbian Medical Society actively participated in the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, the Ministry of Public Health, and the Medical Chamber. Also, in the founding of the Society of Physicians from Banat, Bačka, and Baranja (November 19, 1919 – the Society of Physicians of Vojvodina SMS inherits this date as the beginning of its work) and the Yugoslav Medical Society.

The amendments to the "Rules" from 1919 provided the statutory possibility to establish specialist sections "for the purpose of differentiating and deepening professional papers and discussions"¹⁷. In the period leading up to the start of World War II, the first specialist sections of the Society were established: Balneology (1922), Tuberculosis Section (1923), Pediatrics (1925), Dermatovenereology (1928), Radiology (1929), Phthisiology (1931) and Dentistry Section (1933).

At the constituent meeting of the Serbian Medical Society held on July 22, 1872, at the proposal of Dr. Aćim Medović, the president of the Society, a decision was made that "the Society should address the "Serbian Learned Society" in writing for its own premises, in which it would hold its meetings."¹⁸ The Serbian Learned Society responded to this request, and the Serbian Medical Society would be its tenant for the next seven years. Since the Fourth Annual Meeting held on January 13, 1880, the Serbian Medical Society has been working in the premises of the Serbian Society of the Red Cross, in Simina Street.¹⁹ At the end of November 1923, the company moved to the General State Hospital in Vidinska Street (now Džordža Vašingtona Street). The VII. regular meeting was held in the auditorium of the Eye Clinic on December 8, 1923. It was the first expert meeting held in the building that today houses the headquarters of the Serbian Medical Society²⁰. The idea that the Serbian Medical Society would build a building that would be its



Figure 6. Leadership of the Serbian Medical Society of 2024 (Prof. Dr. Milan A. Nedeljković, President, Prof. Dr. Svetolik Avramov, President of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the Serbian Medical Society, Dr. Zoran Vacić, Secretary General, Prof. Dr. Dragoslav Bašić, Vice-President)

property was conceived at the turn of the century, in 1900. Due to numerous administrative difficulties and wars fought in the first decades of the 20th century, the idea was never implemented. However, thanks to endowments, funds, and legacies: Savka Panić ("Endowment of Dr. Steva Milosavljević, the first Serbian Chief of the Medical Corps"), Dr. Vojislav M. Subotić ("Endowment of the physician † Luka and his parents † Melanija and Dr. Vojislav Subotić"), Katarina Ranimir ("Fund of Ilija and Katarina Ranimir, dentists from Belgrade"), Dr. Milutin Popović of Belgrade, Dr. Mihailo Petrović of Šabac, and Dr. Radomir Miladinović of Paraćin, as well as the contributions and loans of physicians, the necessary financial means were gathered, and the construction of the home of the Serbian Medical Society commenced in 1931. The Society celebrated its sixtieth anniversary on May 5, 1932, in its building in Kraljice Natalije Street. (21)

The work of the Serbian Medical Society after World War II

After the end of World War II, the Serbian Medical Society resumed its work. The first post-war assembly of SMS was held in April 1946. The assembly members accepted the "Rules of the Serbian Medical Society", according to which SMS became the association of all doctors in Serbia. The first decades after World War II were the "golden age" of SMS. Branches were established and, for the purpose of "professional development and improvement of scientific work", a large number of sections were established or renewed (Radiology, Cardiology, Neuropsychiatry, Gynecology and Obstetrics, Dermatovenereology, Surgery and others). The newly established sections fully accomplished the task set before them and made

"a considerable contribution to the organization of the professional work of the Society." The Section for the History of Medicine and Pharmacy was founded in 1950. This section went on to establish the Museum of Serbian Medicine of the Serbian Medical Society (1955). The Dental Section of the Society initiated the founding of the School of Dental Medicine in Belgrade (1948). At the 90th regular Assembly of the Serbian Medical Society, held on December 15, 1976, decisions were made on the establishment of the Medical Academy of SMS, its objectives were defined, and a limit to the number of members was set. At the Founding Assembly of the Academy (July 27, 1977), it was decided to form scientific groups for Preventive Medicine, Internal Medicine, and a Surgical Scientific Group. In 1995, the decision was made to establish branches of the Academy in Novi Sad and Niš. With the amendments to the *Statute* of SMS in 1998, its name was changed to the Academy of Medical Sciences of the Serbian Medical Society²².

The Serbian Medical Society today

Nowadays, the Serbian Medical Society has 62 sections, 47 branches, and around 15 thousand active members. The current leadership of the Serbian Medical Society, headed by President Professor Dr. Milan A. Nedeljković, elected on November 17, 2023, has set the following goals: positioning SMS in the Law on Health Care, which

would give the Society the importance it deserves based on tradition, reputation, and scientific and professional capacities of its members, increasing membership, and encouraging branches and sections to work more actively in the field of continuing education.

Since 2010, continuing medical education has been legally required for the renewal of a medical license. The sections and branches of the Serbian Medical Society, the Society of Physicians of Vojvodina SMS, and the Society of Physicians of Kosovo and Metohija SMS organize expert meetings, symposia, courses, seminars, congresses, and other forms of education for physicians and dentists, remaining faithful to the first principle of the Society's *Constitution* established in 1872: "To follow, through its labors, the contemporary advancement of the whole of medical science, together with those branches of natural philosophy which stand as its auxiliaries; to progress in harmony with the gradual development of medicine; to perfect itself by the constant experience of daily practice; and to spread such experience, both in writing and by word of mouth, concerning its own endeavors as well as the discoveries of others."

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Sažetak

Istorija Srpskog lekarskog društva u periodu od 1872. do 2025. Godine

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Prva ideja da se osnuje Lekarsko društvo koje bi okupilo sve lekare Kneževine Srbije, i koje bi izdavalo svoj časopis, potiče od dr Aćima Medovića (1859. godine). Dr Vladan Đorđević sa četrnaestoricom kolega osniva 1872. godine Srpsko lekarsko društvo koje od 1874. izdaje časopis Srpski arhiv za celokupno lekarstvo. Shodno ciljevima koji su proklamovani u „Ustavu Srpskog lekarskog društva“, rad društva uglavnom se svodio na dodatno obrazovanje lekara. Praktično, do osnivanja Medicinskog fakulteta u Beogradu, SLD je bio jedino mesto gde su lekari mogli da stiču nova znanja iz svih oblasti medicine. Srpsko lekarsko društvo aktivno učestvuje u osnivanju Medicinskog fakulteta u Beogradu (1920), Ministarstva narodnog zdravlja (1918), Lekarske komore (1921) i Stomatološkog fakulteta u Beogradu (1948). Prve specijalističke sekcije u okviru SLD osnivaju se u periodu između dva svetska rata. Po okončanju Drugog svetskog rata osniva se veći broj specijalističkih sekcija i podružnica. Danas Srpsko lekarsko društvo ima 62 sekcije, 47 podružnica i oko 15 hiljada aktivnih članova. U okviru društva deluje i Akademija medicinskih nauka.

Ključne reči: osnivači, sekcije, podružnice, časopis, akademija