Bernardini Ramazzini (1633-1714) was born in Capri, northern Italy, during tumultuous period in European history characterized by deep recession affecting every aspect of life. Tribunal of inquisition had banned Galileo’s teaching and war was raging in the north.

Ramazzini studied at the University of Parma and became physician in 1659. Later for some time he practiced in the periphery of Rome, but subsequently chose Modena, which had recently established medical school. His hostile reception by the profession was counterbalanced by his successful practice and favor from Ducal Court. He was appointed to the chair of Professor Theory of medicine. Here, he became interested in the neglected occupational medicine and remained discharging his duties for almost 20 years. During this time he extensively studied workers in various industries and professions. Convinced that workers’ disorders had an important socioeconomic impact, he went to their workshops, talked to workers, and studied the conditions under which they worked. Ramazzini diagnosed health disorders with masterly clinical observations, and suggested measures to protect health. He proposed that physicians should extend the list of questions to ask the patients—“What is your occupation?”

Ramazzini published his principal treatise in Latin—De Morbis Artificum Diatriba - Diseases of Tradesman (Occupation), in 1700. In the De Morbis he outlined the health hazards of chemicals, dust, metals, repetitive violent motions, odd postures and other factors encountered by various workers in approximately 70 occupations leading to diseases. Hazards of the environment were distinguished from hazards of physical participation in the work. Mercury and lead are examples of the first group. Writer’s cramps, simian round shoulders of cobblers, and sciatica of tailors are some examples in the second group. De Morbis was one of the founding and seminal works on occupational medicine and played a substantial role in its further development. Ramazzini’s insights on prevention were no less significant. In fact he anticipated different issues within the framework of public health. The methodological approach, the interest towards vulnerable group, the concerns towards disabling disorders, and the need to cooperate with other physicians and hygienists was stressed in the treatise. Ramazzini clearly foresaw that prevention is better than cure.

As an epidemiologist, Bernardini contributed to the understanding of rinderpest and described epidemics of malaria. He was an early proponent of using cinchona bark in the treatment of malaria. As a meteorologist he noted the varying heights of Torecelian column of mercury with weather changes. In 1700, the senate appointed him to the first chair of the practice of medicine.

Karl Marx cited Ramazzini’s work as a characteristic historic document of early manufacturing period in the beginning of industrial period, to support his anti-capitalist views. De Morbis Artificum Diatriba’s first English edition appeared in 1705, just 5 years after Latin princeps edition. Historians’ claim the De Morbis Diatriba is to the history of occupational diseases what Vesalius’s book is to anatomy, Harvey to physiology, and Morgagni’s to pathology. Bernardino Ramazzini died in Padua in 1714. Many scientific societies on occupational hygiene have been named after Ramazzini in several countries including Italy and the USA.

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