

# The history of novel dermatology and dermatopathology in different countries - Tunisia

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## Introduction

The Republic of Tunisia is the northern most country in Africa, covering 165,000 square kilometres. As of 2013, its population is estimated at just under 10.8 million. Its name is derived from its capital city, Tunis, which is located on the country's northeast coast. Tunisia is situated on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, midway between the Atlantic Ocean and the Nile Delta. It is bordered by Algeria on the west and Libya on the south east. It lies between latitudes 30° and 38°N, and longitudes 7° and 12°E. An abrupt southward turn of the Mediterranean coast in northern Tunisia gives the country two distinctive Mediterranean coasts, west-east in the north, and north-south in the east. The population of Tunisia, from a sociological, historical and genealogical standpoint, are made up of people of mainly distinct and mixed Arab, Berber, and Turkish descent. The first people known to history in what is now Tunisia were the Berbers. Numerous civilizations and peoples have invaded, migrated to, or have been assimilated into the population over the millennia, with influences of population from Phoenicians/Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Arabs, Spaniards, Ottoman Turks and Janissaries, and French. There was a continuing inflow of nomadic Arab tribes from Arabia. The majority of Tunisia's population (around 98%) are Muslims while about 2% follow Christianity and Judaism or other religions. The bulk of Tunisians belong to the Maliki School of Sunni Islam. Arabic is the official language and Tunisian Arabic is the national, vernacular variety of Arabic and is used by the public.

The Tunisian Society of Dermatology and Venereology (<http://www.dermato-tunisie.org>) was born in the 1st day of February 1980. Its first president was Dr. Rached Laajimi (Figure 1). Now, the members of the society are more than 300 dermatologists. Many subgroups were also created (Lasers, Aesthetics, Psoriasis, Pediatric Dermatology, etc). An Annual meeting is organised on national regional or international base. A new association for dermatologists who practice privately is recently founded.

## Academic dermatologic institutions

In Tunisia in 2015, there are 7 dermatology departments in university- related hospitals : four in Tunis (La Rabta Hospital, Charles Nicolle Hospital, Habib Thameur Hospital and the Military Hospital), one in Sousse (Farhat Hached Hospital), one in Monastir (Fattouma Bourguiba Hospital) and one in Sfax (Hedi chaker Hospital). In the following, a brief history of these dermatology centers has been brought:

### Dermatology Department of La Rabta Hospital

The history of the La Rabta Hospital is linked to big epidemics of variola, typhus, plague and cholera, which were common and deadly in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This hospital was a convenient

site (La Rabta in Arabic is a hill) to isolate the affected patients. In 1924 the "lazaret" of la Rabta had some constructed departments and was named the "hospital of contagious patients" until 1930. Then it was named "Ernest Conseil Hospital" on the name of the French doctor who was leading it for many years. In 1985 the name of the hospital was changed to "La Rabta hospital".

The dermatology department was founded in 1940 and headed by the French doctor Chatellier, then a few years after by Jean Ragu until 1953. Dr. Rached Laajimi- the first Tunisian dermatologist-headed the



Figure 1. Dr. Rached Laajimi.

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department from 1953 to 1957. Then he moved to the dermatology department of Charles Nicolles hospital. The department was closed until 1960 when his assistant, Dr. Amor Khalfat, (Figure 2) took the responsibility of the department until 1987. Dr. Amor Khalfat was the first Associate professor admitted by examination of the new faculty of medicine of Tunis in 1973. He was succeeded by Prof. Mahmoud Chaffai for two years who left the department for private practice. Then Prof. Amel Ben Osman headed the department until 2012. A new and modern building was inaugurated in 1996 (Figure 3). Now it is directed by Prof. Mourad Mokni.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dermatology was dominated by syphilis, which was a very common disease. In the sixties, syphilis declined largely and general dermatology was well established as a speciality. Progressively and during the years the department was enriched with a mycology laboratory, Phototherapy unit, lasers unit, pediatric dermatology and dermato-allergology. Since 2004, a research unit was established in the department, which was specialised on genetic skin diseases and autoimmune bullous diseases.

### Dermatology department of Charles Nicolles Hospital

Under French protectorate, an official state hospital for the French residents was built in 1898 and was named "French civil hospital". Initially, there were only three departments: one for general surgery and two for general medicine. During years, the hospital was developed and many specialities were introduced. In 1932, a dermatology center was founded by Dr. Antonio Cassar (Figure 4). He was born in Tunisia in 1892 and he did his medical studies in Toulouse, France. He came back to Tunisia in 1918 and practiced general medicine, then



Figure 4. Dr. Antonio Cassar.

dermatology and venereology. The hospital changed its name in 1944 for "Charles Nicolles Hospital". After the independence of Tunisia (1956), Dr. Rached Laajimi headed the dermatology department. He did his medical studies in Paris, France. In 1937 and 1938, he studied dermatology in Saint Louis Hospital under the responsibility of Prof. Gougerot. Then he came back to Tunisia and practiced dermatology in Sadiki Hospital then in Ernest Conseil hospital (La Rabta now) Hospital and finally in Charles Nicolles Hospital. In 1956, he was elected president of the Tunisian Medical Society of Sciences. In the early seventies, Prof. Ridha Gharbi headed the department of dermatology. He did his medical studies in France and his internship in dermatology in Saint Louis hospital in Paris under the responsibility of Prof. Robert Degos. When he came back to Tunisia, he was the assistant of Dr. Rached Laajimi. He was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Associate Professor nominated by examination in the new faculty of medicine of Tunisia in 1973. He introduced modern dermatologic activities like dermatopathology, mycology, photobiology (with Dr. Mohamed Zghal), electronic microscopy (with Dr. Lassad Lahmar) and Immunofluorescence techniques (with Prof. Mohamed Ridha Kamoun). He organized many international meetings and invited many respected dermatologists from all over the Europe. He left the department for private practice in 1989. Prof. Mohamed Ridha Kamoun who was chief of the department in Habib Thameur hospital took the responsibility of the department. He was among the first group of medical doctors graduated from the New Medical faculty of Tunisia. In 2000, he organized the meetings of the Pan Arab league of dermatology and he was the co-founder of the Tunisian Association Against of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and AIDS. In 2012, Prof. Becima Fazaa took the responsibility of the department. She developed dermatopathology and co-organized many international courses on dermatopathology. Very sadly, she died in 2014. Now, Prof. Zeglaoui Faten is the head of the department.

### Dermatology department of Habib Thameur Hospital

This hospital was founded by the Italian community and was named "Colonial Italian Hospital of Tunisia" in 1900. It was transferred from another old Italian hospital founded in 1891. In 1907, its name was changed in "Joseph Garibaldi Hospital". In 1931, the department of venereal diseases was headed by Dr. Salvatore Di Vittorio and the dermatology department by his cousin Dr. Amedeo Di Vittorio. After the independence, the department was headed by Prof. Hammadi



Figure 2. Dr. Amor Khalfat.



Figure 3. Department of dermatology La Rabta Hospital.

Lakhoua. Then in the eighties by Prof. Mohamed Ridha Kamoun until 1988, by Prof. Rafika Souissi until 2001, then Prof. Insaf Mokhtar until 2015. During the last 10 years a new and modern department was built and well equipped with a special interest in laser therapy, phototherapy and genetic diseases. A research unit was also established these recent years. The Department is now headed by Prof. Sami Fenniche.

### **Dermatology department of Military Hospital**

In 1886, under the french protectorate, a small military hospital was built on the Belvedere Hill in Tunis. After many years, the hospital was progressively developed and was named Louis Villard hospital in 1937 on the name of a famous french military bacteriologist. After the independence in 1956, there was only an out patient unit for dermatology without a full time dermatologist. In 1986, Prof Néjib Doss directed the 1st independant department of dermatology for military health. In 1989, all the Military hospital moved in a new, big and modern Hospital. The dermatology department is responsible for the examination of the new recruited subjects and the skin health of all the military personnel and their parents. All the aspects of general dermatology were developed with a special interest in psoriasis and scabies.

### **Dermatology department of Farhat Hached Hospital - Sousse**

This department is the major dermatology institution for central Tunisia. The department was founded after the independence in 1983 and was headed by Prof. Bechir Jomaa. In 1992, Prof. Jomaa left the hospital for private practice and Prof. Rafiaa Nouira has been the chief of the departement until now. Now all the activities of modern dermatology have been introduced with a special interest on genetic diseases, psoriasis, etc. A research unit on occupational dermatology is also created.

### **Dermatology departement of Fattouma Bourguiba Hospital - Monastir**

It is the youngest department of dermatology. It was founded in

1993. Prof. Jamel Zili is the head of the departement. Now a big team of academic dermatologists developed a variety of dermatologic activities with a special interest in allergic and occupational dermatology. A research unit in skin allergology was also established.

### **Dermatology departement of Hedi Chaker Hospital - Sfax**

In 1974, the medicine faculty of Sfax was founded and the principal hospital became a university. Then, Prof. Abdemajid Zahaf, a young dermatologist, negotiated fiercly with the authorities to create an out-patient dermatology unit within the department of internal medecine. This situation existed until 1980, when a new and independent department of dermatology was established. This department is the reference department for south Tunisia. Progressively, it moved to a modern department covering all dermatology subspecialities (Phototherapy, Allergology, Dermologic surgery, Peditric dermatology, Bullous diseses). Prof. Zahaf was the co-founder of the Tunisian Association Against of Sexually Tranmitted Diseases and AIDS. He also organised the international congress in 2003 for francophone dermatologists in Sfax which had a great success. From 2005, Prof. Hamida Turki has been the head of this department. The department has collaborations with multiple research units.

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