

Feeding Children in the Brussels Hospitals in the 19th Century

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The paper aims at studying the way adults and children were fed in the two public hospitals in the city of Brussels in the long 19th century. Its hypothesis is that the children's diet got more attention, and that therefore the quality of the food improved more than that of the adults.

This hypothesis is based on the assumption that hygienists and doctors focused on easily targetable and vulnerable groups, on the idea that affective relations between adults and children changed, and on assumptions, rooted in eugenetics, that the "quality of the human sort" was deteriorating.

This research uses hospitals archives (statistics, complaints, reports, and the like) and contemporary writings. Central are three rulebooks (1832, 1861 and 1877) that allow to following the diet of children and adults, constructing the calorie intake (as an educated guess) in the three periods. This quantitative approach is placed within the hospital context that is approached via close reading of texts. I accept that, in generally, the children's diet in the hospitals reflected the one outside the hospital walls.

This investigation wishes to contribute to wider social and economic historiography in that knowledge about the dietary standard of children needs attention in the light of debates about economic performance (during the industrial revolution) and consumption (during the 1900s consumer revolution), in which children played a role.