Memory and syphilis: Why designate an awareness date?

A memória e a sífilis: Por que uma data para conscientização?

Thiago Petra da Silva[1]

INTRODUCTION

Every year, on the third Saturday of October, several health professionals and managers carry out multiple actions throughout Brazil for the National Day to Combat Syphilis and Congenital Syphilis. The date was instituted through Law No. 13,430/2017[1], with the objective of stimulating the participation of these professionals in activities that must emphasize "the importance of adequate diagnosis and treatment of syphilis in pregnant women during prenatal care and of syphilis in both sexes as a sexually transmitted disease" (author's translation), as stated in Art. 2, sole paragraph, of the law. Tents are set up in public squares to perform rapid testing, leaflets and condoms are distributed on the streets, and posters reinforce the campaign in health units and hospitals. There is mobilization of civil society, actions in schools and universities, and journalists produce news that brings the topic closer to the general population. It is also possible to observe more creative actions that go beyond conventional technical communication and medical protocol, such as historical and artistic exhibitions and pieces[2–4], musical and artistic activities, and even an off-season Carnival street parade.

Historical and regional perspective

We know that the National Day to Combat Syphilis and Congenital Syphilis was the result of a collective and long-standing struggle. For centuries, syphilographers have been committed to the promotion and prevention of the disease, with the participation of universities, syphilis control leagues, researchers, professors, physicians, the Ministry of Health, and other public and private institutions. In a simple search of the *Brazilian Journal of Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, it is possible to find an article published in June 1995[5], reporting the creation of two municipal laws that instituted the Week to Combat Transmissible Diseases: in Niterói, a municipality in the State of Rio de Janeiro, under Municipal Law No. 981, dated October 3, 1991; and in Oriximiná, a municipality in the State of Pará, under Law No. 5,300, dated November 20, 1991. Both laws defined the first week of April of each year for the promotion of activities that "aim to inform the public about the various types of sexually transmitted diseases and the means of prevention and combat thereof" (author's translation). The Niterói law was repealed by Law No. 3,474, of 2020.

However, the numbers do not lie. Despite the numerous scientific publications, events among health professionals, campaigns by the Ministry of Health and the state and municipal health secretariats, the numbers continue to point to policy ineffectiveness. The effort is continuous, but it is important to shed light on the theme amidst so many health agendas in the country and worldwide.

Reflections from the perspective of social memory

To better understand, I present a small reflection from the field of social memory. In her text "*Five propositions on social memory*", the Brazilian researcher Jô Gondar[6] highlights that the concept of memory is ethical and political, because any perspective that problematizes memory is partial and will have ethical and political implications from the moment it "involves the choice of a past and the bet on a future"[6] (author's translation). Memory is remembrance, but it also implies forgetting, because memory is "the result of a complex and paradoxical relationship between processes of remembering and forgetting, which are no longer seen as opposite polarities and start to integrate a bond of paradoxical coexistence"[6] (author's translation). Syphilis and congenital syphilis are still taboos in our society, as are other sexually transmitted infections. There is stigma and prejudice that circulate in society and reinforce misinformation or the invisibility of the problem.

The creation of a commemorative date or, in this case, a national mobilization date, can be considered a regulated exercise of memory. In the case of this date, there is a commitment from the State and society to ensure that the struggle against syphilis and congenital syphilis is not forgotten amidst so many other important health priorities. At the same time that surveillance and prevention actions are mobilized, memories or stories circulate as part of this urgency, and not just as a museum record. Carrying out actions on a national date becomes a symbolic reference for the collective imaginary of the struggle to control syphilis. This is an attempt to turn it into a place of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), a concept proposed by the French historian Pierre Nora in his text "*Les Lieux de Mémoire*", published in 1993[7].

> Places of memory are, above all, remains. The extreme form where a commemorative consciousness subsists in a history that calls for it, because it ignores it. It is the de-ritualization of our world that makes the notion appear. What secretes, dresses, establishes, builds, decrees, maintains by artifice and will a collectivity fundamentally involved in its transformation and its renewal. Valuing, by nature, the new more than the old, the young more than the old, the future more than the past. Museums, archives, cemeteries and collections, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, minutes, monuments, sanctuaries, associations are the boundary-stones of another age, illusions of eternity. Hence the nostalgic aspect of these pious undertakings, pathetic and glacial. They are the rituals of a society without ritual; fleeting sacralizations

[1]Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Post-Graduate Program in Social Memory – Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brazil.

> in a society that desacralizes; particular loyalties of a society that flattens particularisms; effective differentiations in a society that levels by principle; signs of recognition and group belonging in a society that only tends to recognize equal and identical individuals[7]. (author's translation).

"Places of memory are born and live from the feeling that there is no spontaneous memory"[7]. As Nora and Khoury points out, "without commemorative vigilance, history would quickly sweep them away. They are bastions upon which it leans. But if what they defend were not threatened, there would also be no need to build them"[7].

Commemorative dates are residues, traces, and history, a proposal for the continuity of that of which there are no memories. As Nora and Khoury states in the text, we are in a society condemned to forgetting and which makes of the past history, and no longer memory, as it no longer exists. If there is a need for traces, distance, and mediation, "we are no longer within true memory, but within history"[7]. According to Nora and Khoury [7], "what we call memory is, in fact, the gigantic and dizzying constitution of the material stock of what it is impossible for us to remember, an unfathomable repertoire of what we might need to remember".

The creation of a date is a will to memory. In the material aspect, it is the inscription of the date in the official calendar, in public health planning and in laws. Commemorative dates are functional, as they do not exist only to remember, but there are campaigns, testing, and mobilization of managers; and they are symbolic, as they represent the duty of the State and society to eradicate vertical transmission and raise population awareness.

The international scenario and the need for a global date

By bringing reflections based on the theoretical framework of the field of social memory, we expand the debate beyond the medical or epidemiological discourse. The Brazilian experience of a mobilization date anchors the identity of the struggle in the country, which passes through the efforts of professionals, managers, researchers, civil society, the press, and health, education, and science institutions. However, we know that syphilis does not respect borders.

Currently, there is no global date dedicated to syphilis and congenital syphilis. Only in the calendar of world health days linked to the World Health Organization, we have World Neglected Tropical Diseases Day (January 30), World Malaria Day (April 25), World AIDS Day (December 1), in addition to dates created by world reference institutions, such as World Cancer Day (February 4), with activities developed in Brazil by the National Cancer Institute, national dates such as the National Day to Combat Smoking (August 29), created in 1986 by Federal Law No. 7,488, and awareness months, such as Yellow September (for suicide prevention), Pink October (for women's breast and cervical cancer awareness), Blue November (for men's health), and Red December (for AIDS prevention). But in the case of syphilis and congenital syphilis, each country develops its own actions, with specific articulations that ignore the potential of the collectivization of the cause. The Pan American Health Organization recently established October 28 as the National Day to Combat Syphilis and Congenital Syphilis for the countries of the Americas, requesting regional adherence[8]. In Colombia, October 20 is considered the "World" Day for the Elimination of Syphilis and Congenital Syphilis[9]. Recently, the municipality of San Martín, in the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, approved its law determining the third Saturday of October, just as it is in Brazil, as the "Municipal Day for the Elimination of Syphilis and Congenital Syphilis". In the United States, April is STI Awareness Month[10].

The creation of a world date would symbolize the cause as a humanitarian imperative, a global commitment. Why not unite efforts globally, in a coordinated manner, to collectively impact the current numbers of syphilis and congenital syphilis in Brazil and the world? Why not foster this will to memory and make syphilis become a collaborative global discussion at least one day a year, as in other important dates?

Finally, on the page eliminasifilis.com, access to a public petition addressed to the director of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, is available, requesting the creation of a world date for the elimination of syphilis and congenital syphilis. We invite everyone to support the cause.

Funding

The author declare no financial support.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Use of AI in manuscript construction

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used the Gemini model (Google) to assist with translation from Portuguese into English and terminology refinement.

Role of the funding/sponsoring source

The funding agency had no role in the preparation, review, or approval of the manuscript, nor in the decision to submit it for publication.

REFERENCES

1. Brazil. Presidência da República. Lei nº 13,430, de 31 de março de 2017. Institui o Dia Nacional de Combate à Sífilis e à Sífilis Congênita. Diário Oficial da União [Internet]. Brasília; 2017 [cited on 2026 Apr. 29]. Available from: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2015-2018/2017/lei/l13430.htm
2. Passos MRL, Petra T. Syphilis or perpetual evil: art, science, history, memories. Niterói: Nitpress, 2025.
3. Brazil. Ministério da Saúde. Virtual exhibition Syphilis: History, Science, Art [Internet]. Brasília: Ministério da Saúde; 2021 [cited on 2026 Apr. 29]. Available from: https://exposifilis.aids.gov.br/
4. Moraes C, Petra T, Passos MRL. Digital reconstruction of Girolamo Fracastoro's face: A 3D bust derived from historical portraits. Digit Appl Archaeol Cult Herit. 2026;41:e00530. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.daach.2026.e00530
5. JBDST. Combatting STDs is now law in Niterói (RJ) - Oriximiná (Pará) and in the entire State of Rio de Janeiro [Internet]. J bras Doenças Sex Transm. 1995 [cited on 2026 Apr. 29];7(2):39-40. Available from: https://www.bjstd.org/revista/article/view/103/90

6. Gondar, J. Five propositions on social memory. Morpheus. 2016;9(15):19-40.
7. Nora P, Khoury YA, translator. Entre memória e história: a problemática dos lugares. Proj Hist. 1993;(10):7-28.
8. Pan American Health Organization. Agreement for action: 15 key recommendations to eliminate syphilis and congenital syphilis in the Region of the Americas [Internet]. Washington: PAHO; 2024 [cited on 2026 May 3]. Available from: https://www.paho.org/es/documentos/acuerdo-para-accion-15-recomendaciones-clave-para-eliminar-sifilis-sifilis-congenita
9. Colombia. Presidencia de la República. With early diagnosis, Colombia manages to avoid more than 585 cases of congenital syphilis in three years. Bogotá: Presidencia de la República; 2025 [cited on 2026 May 3]. Available from: https://www.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/Con-diagnostico-temprano-Colombia-logra-evitar-mas-de-585-casos-de-sifilis-251020.aspx
10. American Sexual Health Association. April is STI Awareness Month [Internet]. Research Triangle Park: ASHA; c2024 [cited on 2026 May 3]. Available from: https://www.ashasexualhealth.org/april-is-sti-awareness-month/

Address for correspondence
THIAGO PETRA
Rua Professor Otacílio. 133, bl 1, apt 302 – Santa Rosa
Niterói (RJ), Brazil
CEP: 24240-670
E-mail: thiagopetra.midia@gmail.com

Received on: 05.06.2026
Approved on: 08.04.2026

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons license.