

**MIGUEL PERDOMO NEIRA:  
HEALING, CULTURE, AND POWER  
IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ANDES**

**David Sowell**  
*Department of History*  
*Juniata College*  
*Huntingdon, USA*

**I**n late April, 1872, the *curandero* (healer) Miguel Perdomo Neira arrived in Bogotá amid widespread rumors that he had come to heal the terminally ill, or lead Conservatives in rebellion. The lay healer had traveled from town to town for the previous six years, performing operations and cures that some viewed as miraculous. Professional physicians on the faculty of the Universidad Nacional received him with so much hostility as to spark a minor riot. In this event, broad segments of the people fought medical students and parts of the official political community. At first, the social conflict evident in this event seemed to locate the unrest within the norms of a turbulent period of Colombian history. Such an interpretation led to questions about which groups were active? What did the crowd seek in their defense of Perdomo? What inspired medical students to take to the streets? In short, how did this incident relate to the sociopolitical history of the period? This analysis proved inadequate and further inquiry led away from sociopolitics to the history of medicine and medical ideologies, issues that seemed more central to the episode. Fundamentally, what was going on that led a significant portion of the *pueblo* and leading members of the medical community to clash? What was being contested? What values and ideologies are visible in this event? This incident illuminating the conflict between “traditional” and “modern” attitudes toward medicine and, in a larger context, the transformation of traditional Hispanic intellectual and social norms evident in the region’s medical systems.

## Miguel Perdomo Neira

Most of the life of Miguel Perdomo Neira lies beyond the reach of the historian's inquiries. Born in 1833 in the small town of La Plata, Colombia, Perdomo died in 1874 in Guayaquil, Ecuador.<sup>1</sup> Perdomo apparently labored as an empiric — a bleeder and dentist — medical occupations practiced by lay physicians. Perdomo claimed to have served in the civil war of 1859-62 under the command of Conservative warlord Colonel Julio Arboleda. This conflict pitted Conservative defenders of the church, regional autonomy, and a traditional social order against Liberal proponents of economic change, the liberalization of society, and secularism. Perdomo's medical skills reportedly came to Arboleda's attention, whereupon he was assigned to the army's field hospital. The brutal fighting offered Perdomo abundant opportunities to expand his medical experience, especially his surgical skills.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that the civil war served as a turning point in Perdomo's life. Apparently traumatized by his wartime experience, Perdomo sought refuge with an indigenous tribe in Caquetá after 1862. He stayed with the people some time, marrying a member of the tribe and learning many of their medical secrets. In particular, Perdomo acquired the knowledge of various medicinal herbs that reportedly allowed him to perform challenging operations without blood or pain and to quickly reduce inflammation. He also learned of a purgative that he called "El Toro" and a powerful emetic, "La Chispa." Accounts mention his collection of stimulants and depressants that some alleged to be "more powerful than those now in use," Indian pharmaceuticals not available in Hispanic pharmacies.<sup>3</sup>

In time, the *curandero* left Caquetá to travel from village to village, practicing his medicine on the inhabitants of an area in exchange for shelter and sustenance from the city council, local parish, or similar agency. In 1872 Perdomo claimed to have practiced in over 120 villages. The territory he allegedly covered is vast: Pinchincha and Guayas provinces, Ecuador, and throughout the Cauca, Antioquia, Tolima, Cundinamarca, and Santander regions of Colombia.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Madero Moreira, Mauro, *Historia de la medicina en la provincia del Guayas* (Guayaquil: Imprenta de la Casa de la Cultura, 1955), 237; *El Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 11, 1872; *La Ilustración*, February 19, 1875.

<sup>2</sup> *El Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 1872.

<sup>3</sup> *El Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 1872, April 26, 1873; *El Tradicionista*, May 7, 1872.

<sup>4</sup> *La Ilustración*, June 4, 1872; *Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 21, 1872.

As Perdomo approached Bogotá in April 1872, news of his impending arrival sent waves of anticipation through the Colombian capital.<sup>5</sup> For some, Perdomo represented the opportunity to be cured of their ailments. For many members of the Liberal party, which had dominated the national government since its victory over the Conservatives in the bitter civil war, the Conservative *curandero* inspired fears of insurrection against their rule. Perdomo's initial "office" soon attracted so many people that he had to move to a new location.<sup>6</sup> Professionally trained doctors, alarmed at Perdomo's popularity, promptly expressed their skepticism of his abilities in a publicly circulated leaflet. The leaflet invited Perdomo to demonstrate his skills under controlled conditions so "that we, already old in the art of curing," could assess the "scientific usefulness" of his methods.<sup>7</sup> A leading Liberal daily echoed the physicians' challenge by charging that Perdomo had only superficial knowledge and that he was "denigrating science and exciting [the people] against those who practice it."<sup>8</sup>

The publicist Manuel María Madiedo also directed his editorial skills to an analysis of Perdomo. Public opinion, Madiedo observed, was sharply divided. For some, Perdomo was a wise man, a wizard, a man of providence, or perhaps a demi-god. Others ridiculed these sentiments, claiming that he was nothing more than a demonic, audacious charlatan. Still others guarded their opinions, waiting for more information. Madiedo agreed with the latter opinion, lamenting that Bogotá had become divided between the "applause of the masses and the ire of the professional doctors." Although much remained to be determined, Madiedo was confident that Perdomo possessed important anesthetic and homeostatic knowledge that merited further inquiry. Perdomo's abilities, because they had been demonstrated in open, "like the barbers of Athens," could not be doubted.

If Mr. Perdomo really possesses a secret, even half a secret; but enough to revolutionize medical therapy, who are we to offend him, to anger him, to irritate him? . . . Our professors should approach this man, this poor man of the people, in whom the people believe and love.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>*La Ilustración*, May 4, 1872; *El Bien Pdblico*, May 22, 1872.

<sup>6</sup>*La Ilustración*, May 4, 7, 1872.

<sup>7</sup>*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 1872; *Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 8, 13, 1872.

<sup>8</sup>*Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 1872.

<sup>9</sup>*La Ilustración*, May 8, 1872.

Three physicians on the staff of the Hospital of Charity soon challenged Perdomo to demonstrate his surgical skills. They invited him to visit the hospital, or allow them to come to his office, so that they could form an opinion of “his ability in so difficult a science.”

We don't want to place Mr. Perdomo in the obligation of having to undergo an examination, because we know beforehand that he is ignorant of the structure of the human body, that he knows nothing of the three realms of nature, and that the medical progresses of the day are for him a problem lost in the darkness of ignorance. We only ask, then, practical proofs from him, but in the light, without circumlocution or mystification.<sup>10</sup>

Around this time, Tomás Sabogal, a middle aged man with a giant tumor on his side, sought out Perdomo's medical assistance. Perdomo removed the tumor in what some described as a difficult procedure. Observers of the operation were so impressed by the size of the tumor (Perdomo wrote that it weighed 14 pounds!) that they paraded it through the streets of the capital. Sabogal allegedly survived the procedure without complications and slept that evening in Perdomo's shop. The next morning he was found dead, with a knife wound in his side.<sup>11</sup>

Who killed him? Perdomo's supporters insisted that a youthful accomplice of the doctors had murdered the poor soul to tarnish Perdomo's public success. Others alleged that the *curandero* himself had done the deed to hide his failure, a belief supported by an autopsy that determined that the wound had been made in an already deceased body. Perdomo's followers understandably rejected this finding by the professional physicians. Whatever the truth of the matter, Perdomistas took to the streets. Crowds surrounded and stoned the houses of several physicians, forcing at least one to flee the city. Medical students met the crowds, harassing them with cries of “*Abajo los perdomistas, los fanaticos . . .*” Governmental officials became so alarmed that they put the army on alert and called upon the state police to restore order. Those of the *pueblo* caught “disturbing” the peace were arrested. Perdomo himself helped to calm the crowd, only to leave what he called an “ungrateful city” several days later.<sup>12</sup>

Perdomo never returned to Bogotá. After a trip to the Santander region, he visited his native Tolima before making a final trip to Ecuador in early 1874.

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<sup>10</sup>*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 1872.

<sup>11</sup>*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 1872; *La Ilustración*, May 14, June 4, 1872.

<sup>12</sup>*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 18, 1872; *La Ilustración*, May 14, 16, June 1, 4, 1872; *Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 21, 1872.

Once again his surgical skills won him fame, but also legal problems. A woman died from an operation and Perdomo was jailed in Quito. Padre Luis Sodiro, a Professor of Botany at the Polytechnic School, apparently helped Perdomo gain his freedom in exchange for information about the plants he used in his practice.<sup>13</sup> Perdomo left shortly thereafter for the port of Guayaquil, where he treated the scores of people who sought assistance. On Christmas Eve, 1874, Perdomo succumbed to a rapid illness, perhaps yellow fever, leaving behind a reputation that lasted to the end of the century.

Healing and medicine are so central to human existence that we all have personal experiences that enable us to connect in some degree with the experiences of other historical actors. This connection allows for engagement and curiosity, keys that can draw us into the study of the past. The centrality of healing, while empowering as an entrée to the past, carries with it the danger of projecting the ideas, values, and structures of our own medical system(s) into the “reading” of previous lives, so that other medical systems are often interpreted simply in juxtaposition to the present, a reading that obscures their own cultural logics.

This account of Miguel Perdomo Neira is structured so as to offer insights into a critical period in the history of medicine in the nineteenth-century Andes. It draws upon the words of participants in the narrative and seeks to ascertain possible meanings to those accounts, especially in terms of the historical contexts that shaped the disputes that surrounded Perdomo. This era has many connections with our own. The scientific medical system in which most of us operate was just being institutionalized in this era, suppressing as it gained prominence the previously dominant Hispanic medical system. In this moment of encounter, differences are highlighted. The testimonials of people who sought the services of Perdomo speak both of the healing that he performed and of the social value of his mission. These were values and attributes less commonly associated with the scientific medical system. Moreover, the

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<sup>13</sup>The Polytechnic School opened in October 1870, under Jesuit leadership, several months after Sodiro, Teodoro Wolf, and Juan Bautista Menten arrived from Europe. Sodiro, who had been born in Venice in 1836, became one of the Ecuador's leading botanists. After the school closed in 1876, Sodiro denounced his habits and remained in Ecuador until his death in 1909. César Bustes-Videla, *Church and State in Ecuador: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations during the Age of Gabriel García Moreno, 1860-1875* (Ph. D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1966), 176-80, 182, 185. Sodiro's publications do not appear to mention either Alizá or Perdomo. *Contribuciones al conocimiento de la flora ecuatoriana* (Quito: Tipografía de la Escuela de Artes y Oficios, 1900) and *Una excursión botánica* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1881).

testimonials often came from people whose voices are often absent from the historical record. These are rich sources of information about medical beliefs, even though their limitations require the researcher to speculate more than might otherwise be desired.

Certain aspects of “the case of Perdomo” are clear. After scores of years of relative stability, the Hispanic medical system was under transformative pressures that would in time create the medical pluralism of contemporary Latin America. In simple terms, this moment of transition juxtaposed a highly social, Catholic influenced set of beliefs that drew upon humoral principles with an emerging secular, scientific system that envisioned the body to be a knowable machine whose maladies could be corrected. These two sets of beliefs form the core of the “traditional/popular” and scientific medical systems today.

Healing was more than procedures however. It had been highly social, with knowledge diffused through large segments of the population. Knowledge became the privileged domain of the few professionals under scientific medicine. In the public mind, healing and spirituality had been intimately linked, so that Perdomo’s abilities in curing were inseparable from his Christian charity. Biomedicine separates the profane and spiritual domains. The ideological contentions that were part of this era of transformation were necessarily intense. Beliefs and social behavior are difficult to separate. Healing earlier had had an institutional facet, but the colonial authorities and structures paled in comparison to the legal and professional authorities that would be erected around scientific medicine. The transition also encompassed a profound shift of medical authority, which brought distinct “systems of truth” in conflict.

## Truths in Conflict

There are nine monasteries for men, and three convents for women, the others have fallen into decay in consequence of the revolution, and the increase of knowledge and penetration of the natives, who are fast throwing off the yoke of bigotry and priest craft, and assuming the right of man to think and act for himself. A considerable number of these slugs are, however, still left to fatten on the plunder which they extract from the credulity of the populace, though it is to be hoped that the march of human intellect in the transatlantic world will not be long retarded by such drones, but that a short time will bring them total dispersion.<sup>14</sup> Charles Stuart Cochrane, visitor to Colombia in the 1820s

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Stuart Cochrane, *Journal of a Residence and Travels in Colombia during the years 1823 and 1824*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), II, 9.

Ideologies of healing are basic to cultural artifices. Such fundamental beliefs are generally cast as truth. Truth claims about medicine in the era of Perdomo were contentious, in part because they breached the divisive question of the proper role of the church in society or, put differently, the proper degree to which society should be secularized. Liberal anti-clerics attempted to eliminate all institutional authority of the church; many wished to reduce its social power as well. These advocates for change encountered strong resistance, in part because of the deeply Catholic nature of Andean society. The fusion of Catholicism and healing can be imagined in one early meaning of “salvation,” which implied both medical healing and psychotherapy,<sup>15</sup> a sensibility that is apparent in testimony about Perdomo.

Secularization produced social tensions in many regions of the world. June Macklin, in her discussion of the nineteenth century spiritualism in New England and Mexican spiritism, argues that these religious movements originated in the split between the increasing secularization of temporal life. The intellectual tendencies of deism, materialism, Marxism, anarchism, liberalism, and positivism imagined humans to be purely mechanical beings, a conception that clashed with traditional Catholic and Protestant beliefs.<sup>16</sup> In Colombia, the split lay at the core of the differences between Perdomo and advocates of scientific medicine.

While supporters of Perdomo used the language of Christian charity to express their gratitude and their ideology of healing, many of his scientific opponents used the authority of science to level a rationalist critique against the curandero. Scientists and scientific physicians thought of themselves as “workers of progress” who labored to construct the “edifice of scientific emancipation.”<sup>17</sup> As Uribe Angel stated, “The discovery of the truth, then, is the objective of science, the noble and eternal aspiration of rational beings and the precise foundation upon which the civilized world works.”<sup>18</sup> After the heyday of liberal activism, the early 1870s were an era of widespread conflict between liberal and Catholic ideologies in Colombia. The civil war of 1876-77 had its origins in this ideological struggle. The 1880 election of independent Liberal Rafael Núñez to the presidency signaled the collapse of the Radical Olympus, which was definitively supplanted by the Conservative Regeneration

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<sup>15</sup> June Macklin, “Belief, Ritual, and Healing: New England Spiritualism and Mexican-American Spiritism Compared,” in *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*, ed. by Irving I. Zacesty and Mark P. Leone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 383.

<sup>16</sup> Macklin, “Belief, Ritual, and Healing,” 383-87.

<sup>17</sup> Obregón Torres, *Sociedades científicas*, 68; Abel, *Health Care in Colombia*, 13-14.

of 1886. Insofar as the church's ideology dominated the Conservative party, and quite likely characterized foundational tenets of popular culture, heated ideological contentions were common. These differences shaped the conflicts in the streets of Bogotá, as well as in halls of medical institutions in both Colombia and Ecuador.

By no means did proponents of scientific medicine share a common ideology. In the 1860s, for example, allopaths (the forerunners of biomedicine) and homeopaths expressed their differences in a series of heated public exchanges, a polemic that previewed the tensions surrounding Perdomo.<sup>19</sup> Madiedo's 1863 homage to Hahnemann included bitter criticism of allopaths. Allopathic treatment — purges, emetics, and plasters — were, he alleged, dangerous, while those of homeopaths were much safer, in part because fewer and less powerful drugs were used.

The popularity of that allopathic medicine has enjoyed until now has been popularity born of monopoly. A system so repugnant, so painful, so dangerous, and so costly does not have the ability to be naturally popular.<sup>20</sup>

Vargas Reyes countered that Madiedo spoke well of philosophy and the abstract sciences, but that he knew very little of science, an understanding that could only come from years of study.<sup>21</sup> Vicente María Reyes, the son of the *Gaceta*'s editor, attacked homeopathy on several grounds. First, homeopathy was not a science, but “medical heresy.” Its treatment methodology was ineffective, because it was unscientific. Indeed, both Vicente and Antonio accused homeopaths of being charlatans. Homeopaths should not, they argued, be allowed to bring their medical practices into the Hospital of Charity.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, homeopaths were blocked from the Hospital as biomedicists sought to make homeopathic medicine illegal.

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<sup>18</sup> Uribe Angel, *La medicina en Antioquia*, 82.

<sup>19</sup> José Peregrino Sanmiguel contributed several pieces to this polemic. See his *Carta primera* (Bogotá: Imprenta a Cargo de F. Mantilla, 1866); *La medicina homeopática (Carta segunda)* (Bogotá: Imprenta de F. Mantilla, 1866); *Homeopatía* (Bogotá: Imprenta de Foción Mantilla, 1867); *Carta Cuarta* (Bogotá: Imprenta de Foción Mantilla, 1867); and *Polémica homeopática (Carta Quinta)* (Bogotá: Imprenta de Gaitán, 1869).

<sup>20</sup> Madiedo, *Un eco de Hahnemann*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Gaceta Médica de Bogotá*, November 15, 1864.

<sup>22</sup> *La Homeopatía*, 116, 232-33, 250, 253.

Madiedo replied in turn that both allopathy and homeopathy were scientific, but that they had different philosophies. “Allopathic materialism,” he observed, “sees the body as a machine, in which the disease is identified as a problem with organs.” Its practitioners have “made all of man into a machine, denying that there is any more to it than can be found with the point of a scalpel.” Homeopathy, by contrast, views changes in organs as a phenomena caused by disturbances in the vital force and seeks to changes those phenomena. “. . . in its effort to rehabilitate the lost harmony [of the vital force], Homeopathy does no more than obey the divine condition, stamped by God in his creations, as a universal revelation for the conservation of his works.”<sup>23</sup> Homeopathy, as expressed by Madiedo and Sanmiguel, seems to have far less of the body-mind division of Cartesian rationalism than does biomedicine. It is perhaps not surprising that Madiedo and Sanmiguel were ardent defenders of Catholicism — and of Perdomo. By contrast, nowhere in the medical ideology expressed by medical professors of the School of Medicine does one find discussion of the unified body.

In a similar manner, Perdomo wrote that God created nature for the good of humans, who live within the laws of nature. Humans can discover the secrets of nature, as created by God, such as the plants to combat illness. This ability led Perdomo to insist that his “principles are those of true reason, my knowledge is that of the practical world, and my only book is that of nature.” Some people, he wrote, “confuse the power of God with the jurisdiction of the earth; but if they know the latter, they will know God.” Rationalism is for them the answer to natural science, but Perdomo believed “that God is the source of all reason.” Mysterious then, Perdomo asserted, is the existence of the natural world; its organisms are sustained through the miracles of God.<sup>24</sup> Leandro M. Pulido, an ardent supporter of Perdomo, noted two facets of his healing, the visible(the cure), and the reaction to the divine. Both had to be considered.

If you only take into consideration the first, reason, poor impoverished reason, will go from door to door, like an impertinent beggar, asking of everyone the explanation of the facts; it will go tired, in its pride, when it ought to appeal to faith; in which man can only find the divine treasury of all solutions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Madiedo, *Un eco de Hahnemann*, 4, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Perdomo Neira, *La iglesia católica*, 5, 91, 97, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Leandro M. Pulido, “El Doctor Miguel Perdomo Neira,” *Nieva*, August 10, 1869, in MPN, 148-49.

Such expressions were blasphemous to many scientists and liberals. Medardo Rivas, one of the era's most potent and prolific liberal authors, queried in 1883 whether Perdomo was a man inspired by God to spread his blessings among the poor and destitute, or an impostor who played upon peoples' credulity? Rivas thought the latter. His proof lay in science and rational thought. It was entirely conceivable to Rivas that Perdomo had uncovered here-to-fore unknown medicinal plants whose secrets had been guarded by indigenous peoples, perhaps comparable to quinine. If so, Perdomo should have earned the gratitude of an appreciative nation. If, however, he had cloaked that knowledge behind claims of mystical powers, should he not be condemned as a fraud? Rivas brought a profound rational skepticism to his analysis.

The periodicals and publications about Perdomo affirm that he exercised surgery with prodigious dexterity, skills that he could not have learned among the Indians; he forcefully removed cataracts, which requires a man's lifetime of learning; he extracted cancers, which requires, if it were possible, ability, dexterity, and practice; at the same time he removed goiters, restored sight and hearing, and alleviated [the suffering] of lepers; for each of these infirmities it would be necessary that he had acquired distinct surprising, marvelous, and extraordinary secrets. Reason rejects, or at least does not understand, that a human mind could embrace such surprising knowledge and at the same time this man would be such a genius that he could know infirmities at a glance, and of such ability to perform the most delicate operations; reason can not comprehend that a man could cure 300 sick people at the same time, [people] with different afflictions, most of them incurable; human reason, in sum, can not explain what happened with Perdomo.<sup>26</sup>

Having rejected a rational explanation for Perdomo's reputation, Rivas suggested that it lay, perhaps, in human belief in the marvelous, in the mythical, and in the unexplainable. "These illusions are most fascinating when they offer the fewest guarantees of reality." After a survey of various people with seeming inexplicable powers, he rebuked them all. Rivas concluded that "the lesson left by Perdomo will remind the people to believe in science, which is the truth, and not allow themselves to be deceived by lies, which are fantasies."<sup>27</sup>

One year after Perdomo left Bogotá, a correspondent from the State of Santander wrote a lengthy letter to the *Diario of Cundinamarca*, the leading

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<sup>26</sup> Rivas, "Perdomo," 224.

<sup>27</sup> Rivas, "Perdomo," 224.

Liberal newspaper of the capital city in much the same tone as Rivas. "L. R. S." criticized Perdomo as a charlatan and an incompetent physician who had "the pretension of passing himself off as inspired by God who, knowing the credulity and simplicity of the people, has looked for the support of the fanatics . . ." Perdomo's reputation of "free" services, he said, was true, but he accepted donations, probably close to 5,000 pesos per year. (Daily wages at this time ranged between 1.5 and 3 pesos for unskilled and semi-skilled labor.)<sup>28</sup> L. R. S. suggested that Perdomo operated without knowledge or skill and seldom stayed in one place over two weeks, leaving before his medical shortcomings became widely known. His patients, however, soon realized the unfortunate truth as their illnesses worsened or as they died from his operations. If these charges were true, how did L. R. S. explain Perdomo's popularity?

The answer is easy: poor people are the same everywhere: simple, credulous, enthusiastic and easily fooled by hallucinations. The people are never bothered by analysis, they admire the impassioned and are always oriented toward the marvelous . . . [for example] in their belief in the marvelous accounts for their mass peregrinations to the waters of Lourdes in search of remedies for all their infirmities and cleansing from all their sins.<sup>29</sup>

L. R. S. blasted the people's willingness to believe in which ever "mysterious" individual that appeared, always supported by members of the church.

How strange it that they admire him, that they see in him a mysterious man, approaching on their knees as if he were an alter, with him wearing a priest's collar and always surrounded by priests who have given him their parasitical devotion .<sup>30</sup>

Liberal anti-clericalism joined rationalism in rejecting Perdomo's abilities and popularity.

While scientific rationalism came to dominate the nations' medical institutions, this ideology was not accepted by the bulk of the population, whose medical ideology was profoundly Hispanic. Predictably, Conservatives and others who were closely associated with the Church ardently defended Hispanic beliefs. Sergio Arboleda (1822-1888), the intellectual dean of nineteenth century Colombian Conservatism, served as a powerful and articulate voice for

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<sup>28</sup> *Diario de Cundinamarca*, April 26, 1873.

<sup>29</sup> *Diario de Cundinamarca*, April 26, 1873.

<sup>30</sup> *Diario de Cundinamarca*, April 26, 1873.