

A leprosy museum in Portugal

Leprosy has a long and complicated history in Portugal. The first recorded case of leprosy in Portugal dates back to the 13th century, and the disease prevailed throughout the country until the mid-20th century. During the Middle Ages, people with leprosy were often banished and forced to live in leprosy settlements (*colónias* in Portuguese), which were established in various parts of Portugal. In these colonies, patients were isolated from the rest of society and given minimal medical care.

In the 19th century, several leprosy hospitals were established in Portugal, including one in the city of Lisbon. These hospitals were designed to better care for leprosy patients and prevent the spread of the disease. During this time, the Portuguese government implemented a policy of forced isolation for leprosy patients. The policy required all leprosy patients to be separated from the general population and placed in leprosy settlement. The most famous leprosy settlement was Rovisco Pais, which was established in 1947 and housed thousands of patients over the years.

Despite these efforts to contain the disease, leprosy remained a significant problem in Portugal. It was not until the 1980s, with the introduction of combination antibiotic therapy (MDT), that the disease was effectively brought under control. Since then, the number of leprosy cases in Portugal has significantly decreased. Nowadays, leprosy is a rare disease in Portugal, and most people are treated in public hospitals and clinics. Most new patients are immigrants who have been infected in their country of origin.



The Rovisco Pais leprosy settlement

The Rovisco Pais leprosy settlement was established in 1947 with the aim of housing and treating leprosy patients. The settlement was located in the village of Tocha, about 30 km west of Coimbra in the Beiras region. The leprosarium was named after the Portuguese landowner, beer industrialist, and philanthropist José Rovisco Pais, who was also the owner of the famous beer hall Cervejaria Trindade restaurant in Lisbon.

The physician Bissaya Barreto (1886-1974), who was an authority in the region on implementing medical and public health policies, was appointed to run the leprosarium. The choice of location was influenced, among other factors, by the relatively high incidence of leprosy in the Beiras region and the isolated location in the woods.



Map of the leprosy incidence in Portugal early 20th century. Map provided by the museum.

In the first years of the settlement, thousands of people with leprosy were admitted, many of whom were ostracized from society. Those sent to the settlement had to live in isolation and had few treatment options. Leprosy was a highly stigmatized disease, and many people considered the patients to be punished by God.

Over time, new medicines and treatments were discovered that improved the situation of leprosy patients, and the Rovisco Pais settlement was run more professionally with the appointment of doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals.

From the 1980s onwards, leprosy treatment improved significantly. The role of the Rovisco Pais leprosy settlement became less important, and patients were treated in public hospitals and health centers throughout the country. Patient isolation was abolished. In 1996, the settlement was officially closed, and the remaining patients were treated by other centers. A small number of ex-patients continued to live in the buildings of the complex.

An extensive history of this historical institution can be read in [Alice Cruz's thesis](#) (in Portuguese).



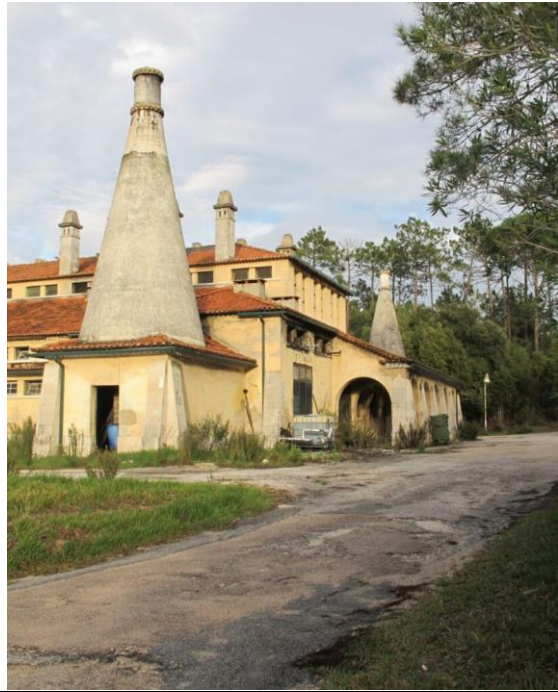
Main building of the former leprosy settlement, now reference centre for rehabilitation medicine.

A new role for the buildings of the leprosy settlement

Today, the Rovisco Pais buildings have been transformed. Some of the buildings were converted into the national reference centre for rehabilitation medicine, while others were renovated for research and administrative purposes. Some buildings continued to serve as housing for older former leprosy patients. In 2023), the last ex-patients have passed away.

The history of the Rovisco Pais leprosy settlement is an important reminder of the stigma and discrimination that leprosy patients have experienced in the past, but also shows how science and medicine have evolved to provide more effective and humane treatments for this disease.

With the help of the Japanese non-governmental organization [Sasakawa Leprosy \(Hansen's Disease\) Initiative](#), a museum was established in some buildings of the former settlement. [The museum](#) was inaugurated on September 7, 2021. The exhibition shows the visitor life in the former leprosy settlement through objects from the past (objects, photos and documents). On March 20, 2023, the [library](#) was opened as part of the museum. The collection includes the documentation and photos of the former hospital. It includes the digital library of periodicals where publications from the former hospital are available in digital format.





Aspects of the museum. All photographs by Henk Eggens.

The museum can be visited: Guided tours are given by appointment.

Calling by phone works best: T +351 231 440 966 / 231 440 900.

Or else: by e-mail: secretariado@roviscopais.min-saude.pt



2023
VISITAS GUIADAS
15h30

7 janeiro | 1 fevereiro | 18 fevereiro | 25 março | 22 abril

NMHRP

— NÚCLEO
MUSEOLÓGICO
DO HOSPITAL
COLÓNIA
ROVISCO PAIS

VISITAS GUIADAS.

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