

THE GENERAL HOSPITAL IN EARLY SINGAPORE (Part I) (1819—1829)

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This article is the first of a series on the medical history of Singapore. Materials for these articles are from primary sources, i.e. from original records and documents. Whenever appropriate, quotations will be culled from these sources to make more interesting reading.

A brief resume of the establishment of the Straits Settlements and its administration is a necessary introduction to a study of the medical history of early Singapore. The "Straits", of course, refers to the Straits of Malacca, and the Settlements were on the eastern side of the Straits.

The Straits Settlements comprising Singapore, Penang and Malacca were British possessions for more than one hundred and thirty years. Penang and Malacca are now constituent States in Malaysia, and Singapore is an independent sovereign Republic.

In the 17th century, the English East India Company was ousted by the Dutch from the islands of the East Indies. However, by the end of the 18th century, after having established themselves firmly in India, the East India Company began to take an interest in the Malayan Archipelago again for a number of reasons. There was an urgent need for a naval base on the sheltered side of the Bay of Bengal from which the Royal Navy could operate during the North-East Monsoon to protect British merchantmen. A port was needed along the China trade route, which could be used for re-fitting and re-victualling the merchantmen, and be used as a headquarters by the British merchants in their endeavours to expand trade in South East Asia.

In 1786, Sir Francis Light acquired Penang from the Sultan of Kedah. On 6th February 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles hoisted the Union Jack over Singapore, and in 1824, by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, Malacca was transferred over to the British in exchange for Bencoolen on the west coast of Sumatra. Thus by 1824, the three British Settlements were established, and by 1826, were known as the Incorporated Settlements of Prince of Wales

Island, Singapore and Malacca, with Prince of Wales Island (Penang) as its capital. In 1832, the capital was transferred to Singapore because of its strategic position and rapid growth.

The headquarters of the Medical Department of the Settlements was in Penang where the Senior Surgeon had his official residence. The Government Medical Services were very modest during the period under review. There was a Senior Surgeon (sometimes called the Superintending Surgeon) who was the professional and administrative head of the Service at Penang, and an Assistant Surgeon at each of the three Settlements.

The first doctors who practised in the Straits Settlements were all Medical Officers in the Army of the East India Company. They came when their Regiments were posted from India to the various Settlements. Ranks held by them were Surgeon-Major, Surgeon, Assistant Surgeon and Sub-assistant Surgeon (later changed to Apothecary). These army surgeons were assisted by a few medical subordinates in the performance of their duties. In the early years, these duties were both military and civil, and if a greater portion of their duties was civil, the surgeons were also known by the designations of their civil posts, e.g. Senior Surgeon in the Straits or Residency Assistant Surgeon. Later on, there was a separation of duties, the Civil or Residency Surgeon in Government employ at each Settlement did not do military work, and the Garrison or Cantonment Surgeon only looked after the Troops and their families.

The Senior Surgeon left Penang when the headquarters of the Medical Department was transferred to Singapore in 1835.

Since Penang was founded thirty three years before Singapore, and was the capital before Singapore, reference would have to be made to developments in Penang every now and then to illustrate trends in early Singapore.

Sir Stamford Raffles arrived at Singapore on 28th January 1819, with a detachment of European and Indian troops in seven ships. One medical man, Sub-assistant Surgeon Thomas Prendergast was responsible for the health of this expedition.

The first Hospital (actually a shed) erected in Singapore was in the Cantonment for the troops. It was known as the General Hospital. Evidence for this is to be found in a letter from the Resident,

Major (later Lt-Colonel) William Farquhar to Sir Stamford Raffles, written on 10th June 1819, when he recommended Prendergast's promotion from Sub-assistant Surgeon to that of Acting Assistant Surgeon:

"... Mr. Sub-assistant Surgeon Prendergast of the Pinang Establishment, who came here in Medical charge of the European and Native troops embarked at Pinang in January last, and who continued in charge of the General Hospital here. . . ." (S.S.R., L. 10., 1819).

In the Treasury Accounts of Singapore from the day of its founding to the end of May 1819, can be found these items: "March, 1819; April, 1819; May, 1819—stoppages for family and Hospital." (S.S.R., L. 10., 1819). These entries refer to deductions from the salaries of soldiers for their families and for hospital charges.

This Hospital, however, could not deal with all the medical problems encountered, and European soldiers were sometimes sent to Penang for "special treatment." (S.S.R., L. 10., 1819).

In May 1819, the 2nd Battalion of the Regiment garrisoning Singapore arrived to relieve the 1st Battalion. The Medical Officer of the 2nd Battalion was Assistant Surgeon William Montgomerie, who was to play a prominent part in the medical history of early Singapore. He was much younger than Prendergast, but was his senior in rank. (There had been a Surgeon Smith, but he was in Singapore for only a few months. He came after February and left in June 1819).

Singapore in the first few years of its founding was very wild. Apart from the Cantonment, a few buildings around it and a few acres under cultivation, the whole island was covered by jungle.

By 1821, there were separate buildings in use as hospitals for European soldiers, sepoys and native paupers. Civilians (government officials and merchants) were treated in their homes by the army surgeons; and if very ill, in the homes of the doctors. One instance was reported in a letter of Colonel Farquhar dated 9th February 1821:

"Mr. Casamajor . . . was in the last stage of dropsy, and so extremely debilitated that he was unable to move without assistance. In this distressing state, the Medical Gentlemen were of opinion that as he would require constant attendance day and night, it would be advisable to have a room prepared for him at Doctor Prendergast's Bungalow, which was accordingly done, and during the short period of his landing and dissolution, the most unremitting attention was paid to him by Mr. Assistant Surgeon Montgomerie and Acting Assistant Surgeon Prendergast. . . ." (S.S.R., L. 4., 1821).

In June 1822, the General Hospital together with the Pauper Hospital were moved further back from the Parade Ground in the Cantonment as they had become a nuisance being too close to the Officers' Quarters. They were re-erected to be in line with the European Barracks and the Sepoy Hospital. (S.S.R., L. 8., 1822).

The General Hospital was administered as a military hospital until December 1822. At this time, was recorded the first instance of a complaint of shortage of staff in the General Hospital. This was only a few months after the second General Hospital had been built to replace the first one. As the number of European troops in Singapore had increased to more than twenty four men, Assistant Surgeon Montgomerie requested that the hospital establishment be increased according to the Army Medical Regulations:

"For a detachment of 24 men and upwards to one Troop or Company:

One Apothecary and Steward in one person.

One Native Compounder and Dresser in one person.

One Coolie for the Shop and Steward's Department.

One Behishtie (water-carrier).

Two Ward Coolies.

In addition to the above, an adequate number of Servants of the 2nd Class for preparing food, washing, shaving, etc. is directed to be furnished by the Commissariat, but will depend on the number of sick in hospital." (S.S.R., L. 6., 1822).

Sir Stamford Raffles was sympathetic, and issued a General Order on 20th January 1823 authorising an increase of staff from 1st February 1823. This General Order also fixed hospital charges, for by this time, the General Hospital (although a military hospital) had already been admitting sick sailors from the many ships calling at Singapore and the European inhabitants of the place. It also stated that the increased expenditure was to be charged to the Civil Department of the Government, thereby tacitly acknowledging the fact that the General Hospital was not strictly a military hospital.

"An Assistant Apothecary who will visit the General Hospital with the Surgeon and have charge of the Medical Stores \$40

A Native Compounder attached to this Department 8

An Allowance to be drawn by the Medical Officer in charge of the General

Hospital to enable him to entertain such additional establishment as may be required for the General Hospital, and to cover any difference of wages between the Bengal rates and those of Singapore. 30

Total per mensem \$78

The above to be drawn for in the Civil Department on account 'Establishment for the General Hospital and Medical Stores'.

Hospital charges for seamen of His Majesty's Ships, and those of the Honourable Company to be charged at the rate of three quarters of a dollar per diem, the supposed daily expenses.

To seamen of Private ships and other private European individuals, the Medical Officer in charge to furnish provisions and Europe and Bazar Medicines and other necessaries at the above rate." (S.S.R., A. 31., 1823).

One February day in 1827, the Residency Surgeon excitedly reported to the Resident that the General Hospital had fallen down "on account of the decay of the temporary materials with which it was originally constructed in the latter end of 1822." (S.S.R., N. 1., 1827). The Executive Officer was straightaway directed to construct another hospital but "with every regard to economy".

An Estimate was submitted in March for the erection of a new General Hospital:

"84 by 36 feet including 8 feet verandah all round, divided into four compartments, having five doors, and three pairs of steps, the floor of plank and raised three feet; one end of the verandah planked 60 feet by 8. Remainder of the Building of attap and cadjan. Cook Room in two divisions, 30 feet by 15, and Privy 14 x 7 with sunken wells." (S.S.R., Q. 4., 1827).

The Governor sanctioned the construction of the new Hospital at the cost of Sicca Rupees 747-3-6 in April 1827, (S.S.R., N. 2. 1827) "on account of the indispensable necessity of such a Building for the convenience of sick officers and seamen landed in the Harbour." (S.S.R., N. 1., 1827) This rebuilding scheme however did not include housing for the subordinate staff, for when the monsoons came at the end of the year, the Executive Officer had to be directed to "order some attaps to be placed on the roofs of the Huts occupied by the Hospital Dressers with all convenient despatch, as they are reported to be uninhabitable in the present Rains." (S.S.R., Q. 2., 1827).

Just before the new General Hospital (the third) was ready for occupation, the Senior Surgeon

was ordered to "prepare rules and rates for admission of patients into the General Hospital upon the principles in practice in Penang with such variation as local circumstances may render necessary." This was accordingly done. (S.S.R., V. 2., 1827); (see Appendix A).

A new Surgeon, Mr. B. C. Henderson, arrived from Penang and assumed charge of the new General Hospital on 27th July 1827. (S.S.R., V. 2., 1827). By August 4th, he was already reporting to the Resident Councillor that thieves were frequenting the General Hospital, and that patients were absconding. He asked for a fence to be built round the hospital and for a military guard. This request written in the literary style of the time makes interesting reading:

"... It appears from the complaints made to me by the European patients and Apprentice, that they are exposed to the nocturnal visits of Thieves, whose object is the removal of whatever utensil or article that may be within reach of the openings left for the admission of light and air in the cajang. In this way, they succeeded only three nights ago in their last attempt, but a much greater evil resulting from such a state of things, is the interruption of repose and quiet of the Sick.

To guard against so serious a nuisance, I would respectfully suggest for your better consideration, the utility of erecting some fence round these Buildings, which would prove beneficial in another point of view, by affording a certain degree of restraint upon the Patients, as a measure of Medical Police, so essential to the well-being of every hospital, particularly one for the reception of Europeans in a hot climate.

I beg leave to add, with reference to securing both of the above important objects that a Military Guard may be deemed highly desirable, and it is usually considered as an essential part of every European Hospital Establishment." (S.S.R., N. 2., 1827).

The posting of the Military Guard led to a misunderstanding between the Military and Civil Authorities. The Military assumed that since there was a guard, the hospital should be under their control. (S.S.R., N. 3., 1827). This controversy was resolved by the Governor and Council in Penang, who ordered that the new General Hospital should be under civil control as no military patients had been admitted into it since there was a separate military hospital in Singapore. (S.S.R., N. 4., 1827).

The Senior Surgeon then informed the Governor and Council that in other parts of India,

hospitals designated "General Hospital" were for the reception of the military sick details. (The Straits Settlements were then administered as part of India.) He proposed that since the hospital at Singapore was to be purely civil, its name should be changed to that of Singapore Civil Hospital or the Singapore Infirmary in order to avoid further confusion and misunderstanding. (S.S.R., I. 34., 1828). The hospital records showed that only the following had been admitted into the hospital—"seamen, servants of private gentlemen and gentlemen of the Honourable Company's Service; and natives (labourers), Chinese, Malay, Javanese and Malabar." (S.S.R., I. 34., 1828).

An Order-in-Council of 18th February 1828 designated the hospital the Civil Hospital or Singapore Infirmary.

The reader may wonder who did all the nursing in the hospital. The Straits Settlements in those early days were also Convict Settlements (mainly for convicts from India), in addition to being political and trading outposts. The convicts were used for all types of work in Singapore. In the Medical Department, some were compounders, dressers, orderlies, sweepers, coolies, etc.

In February 1828, the Senior Surgeon came from Penang on a tour of inspection of the medical establishments in Singapore. This was his official report of the Singapore Infirmary: (S.S.R., A. 51., 1828).

"This Institution contained one European from a ship labouring under insanity, and one Native camp-follower ill of scrofula.

A large attap boarded shed is occupied by them. Cots are provided at the public expense; and the tables, almeirahs and drawers recently paid for by the Government are arranged in this place for the preservation of medicines and instruments in use.

Return of Establishment Attached to the Singapore Infirmary

Name	Rank	Remarks
J. Caswell	Assistant Surgeon	
	Acting Residency Surgeon	
Joseph Powell	Assistant Apothecary	Employed also in the Pauper Hospital.

John

Leicester Hospital
Apprentice - do - and Medical Stores."

There were not many admissions into the hospital. In July 1828, only one European was in the Infirmary suffering from "Dysentery". (S.S.R., A. 56., 1828).

In July 1829, the Surgeon in charge of the Infirmary, Mr. J. G. Sim, complained that the hospital charges were inadequate. The reader may be puzzled why the Surgeon, a professional officer, should have bothered about this financial detail in hospital administration. In early Singapore, the practice of victualling patients in hospital was as follows: The Medical Officer in charge was given a fixed allowance for each patient, and out of this amount he had to supply food and other necessaries according to a Diet Table. There was always a chance that the Surgeon could make a profit or sustain a loss out of this system.

Mr. Sim also recommended a charge for medicines for private patients. (S.S.R., N. 6., 1829): He stated:

"The allowance for an European is one Rupee; for a Native 8 annas per diem. These sums are inadequate for their support in consequence of the high prices of Provisions at this Settlement. Under the circumstances, I beg to recommend that 70 cents per diem be allowed for an European and 35 cents for a Native. I also beg to propose that a charge of 20 cents per diem be made for Medicines supplied to patients sent to the General Infirmary by private individuals, which sum is to be paid to the Honourable Company's Treasury at this Settlement." (Government servants were supplied medicines free from the Medical Stores).

Lest the reader is confused about the use of Rupees and Dollars, it must be explained that during the period under review, both Rupees and Dollars were legal tender. The exchange was roughly two Rupees to a Dollar.

This short review has shown the beginnings of the trends which have culminated in the pattern of medical practice in Singapore today, e.g. hospitals built and maintained by the Government, and certain privileges accorded to Government servants admitted into hospitals.

Cadjan, cajang = kajang, a Malay word for palm frond. Used for roofing, walls and covering.

APPENDIX A

REGULATIONS FOR THE GENERAL HOSPITAL, SINGAPORE

1. No payment will in future be made from the Honourable Company's Treasury on account of Hospital Charges for any Patient not attached to His Majesty's or the Honourable Company's Service.
2. The Surgeon of the General Hospital is authorised to admit into the General Hospital at the Honourable Company's rates, vizt. half a dollar per diem for Europeans and eight annas for Natives, all inhabitants of Singapore applying for admission, receiving from them or from Persons sending them the amount of the Hospital Charges.
3. *Native Seamen:* The Master Attendant will receive applications from Commanders of vessels desirous of sending their native seamen to the General Hospital, and will direct their admission on the Commander finding security for payment monthly of their Hospital Charges, which will be received by the Surgeon of the General Hospital from the Agents who may agree to pay the same.
4. *European and American Seamen:* The Master Attendant will in like manner receive applications for the admission into the Hospital of European and American Seamen on similar security and their charges will be paid in the same manner; but it is also especially directed that no Order for admission be granted by the Master Attendant, unless in addition to the security for payment of

Hospital Charges, full and ample security shall be previously given for obviating any expense to the Honourable Company on account of the maintenance of such seamen on their discharge from Hospital or on account of their transmission to Europe.

5. The Master Attendant will agreeably to the foregoing rules be considered responsible for the validity of the security given for payment of Hospital Charges for seamen admitted on his Order; but it will be the business of the Surgeon of the Hospital to receipt the Monthly Bills, and to obtain payment thereof.

REFERENCES

- S. S. R. = Straits Settlements Records (1800-1872). Microfilm. National Library Holdings, Singapore.
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