

## THE GENERAL HOSPITAL IN EARLY SINGAPORE (PART II) (1830 — 1839)

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A general introduction to the study of the medical history of early Singapore has already been outlined. (Lee, 1973).

The history of the Singapore General Hospital from 1819 to 1829 has already been documented. (Lee, 1973). This article records the developments during the next decade.

The Medical Establishment of Singapore in 1830 consisted of one Assistant Surgeon, one Assistant Apothecary and a few medical subordinates. The standard of practice then could not have been high as it was low in Penang, and Penang was the headquarters of the Medical Department in the Straits at that time. No medical records whatever had been kept in the Penang General Hospital since the day of its founding. The Medical Authorities were reprimanded by the Court of Directors of the East India Company for this:

“We learn with great dissatisfaction that the General Hospital (Penang) contains no medical records whatever. A complete history of every case ought to be regularly made out and preserved. Every particular of the treatment ought to be recorded not merely after the patient's death or recovery, but with as little delay as practicable, in order that the case during its progress may be a source of the greatest possible instruction to the Assistant Surgeons joining your Establishment. . . . We would suggest that bills of mortality should be regularly kept, specifying the age, sex, place of abode and business or occupation of all deceased persons, the cause of their death, the native race or caste to which they belong and whether married or unmarried. Independently of the use of such returns in a medical point of view, their value as statistical documents would be considerable. . . .” (S.S.R., Z. 5., 1830).

A copy of this letter was sent to Singapore for guidance and compliance. It must have been very embarrassing and galling to be told by lay people about the value of accurate medical records in the management of patients and in the teaching of

junior officers. The other significant point was the suggestion that detailed Bills of Mortality should be kept for medical and statistical purposes.

Assistant Surgeon J. G. Sim, the Residency Assistant Surgeon, died in September, 1830, and there was no replacement until February 1831. In the meanwhile, the Army Surgeon, Assistant Surgeon Caswell, acted as the Civil Surgeon.

The General Hospital (the third) which was built in 1827, was allowed to deteriorate, and by 1830 was so dilapidated and unsuited for hospital use, that no one would seek admission except in dire need. The roof was full of holes. The hospital charges were high in spite of the poor facilities afforded.

Assistant Surgeon Thomas Oxley arrived from Penang on 10th February 1831 to assume the post left vacant by Mr. Sim's demise. After one week, he wrote to the Resident Councillor about the condition of the General Hospital:

“ . . . It is with respect to the General Hospital, I would beg leave respectfully to call particular attention. The place allotted for accommodation of general sick (comprising nearly all Europeans from the shipping and every other class of men with the exception of the Chinese) is a small attap shed with floor raised about 18 inches from the ground and perfectly inadequate to protect the inmates from the slightest inclemency of weather as there is not a single yard of the roof through which the rain does not enter. In consequence therefore of its perfect inutility as a place of abode and the present expense attending the keep of a European inmate (being 90 cents per diem), it is impossible that anything but the most pressing emergency would compel a person to apply for admission into it. It would be needless for me to point out the very great benefits that would arise from having an Hospital for Europeans in a place of this kind where there is such a concourse of shipping and where necessarily many must fall victims for the want of receiving that aid which is readily afforded throughout the civilised world to all such as stand in need of it. . . .” S.S.R., W. 1., 1831).

Being an extremely able and energetic young man (who later became Senior Surgeon in the Straits), Oxley proposed that a new General Hos-

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pital should be built to cater for the Europeans and Natives "In full assurance therefore that as soon as the authorities are aware of the present state of things, they will with their usual liberality make such arrangements as will secure an efficient establishment for affording relief to the general sick". He submitted a well-thought out plan dealing with the accommodation, medical aspects, hospital charges and staffing requirements:

*"Proposed plan for an Hospital for the reception of Natives and Europeans.*

That it should be a house of two stories, the lower part being appropriated to Natives, the upper to Europeans.

That it should be sufficiently capacious to accommodate 20 Europeans and 30 Natives; consisting only of two wards with a small room for a dresser above, and a corresponding one for a dispensary and surgery below.

That Government should supply European medicine and wine for the sick and that the Surgeon should supply them with food, country medicine, bandages, etc., and also keeping the original stock of beds in reserve.

A fixed rate of one Rupee per diem for Europeans and 20 cents for Natives to be recovered from the person or persons who sent the patient into hospital.

That Government should further employ six convicts in the following capacities: one native dresser, one cook, one toty and three ward coolies; also supply firewood and oil.

Principal expense to Government would be in the first outlay and ought not to exceed \$2000, and would be amply repaid by the material benefits accruing to the Settlement.

Pay proposed:

Assistant	
Apothecary	50 Rs.
Native Dresser	10
Other convicts	20
	—
	80 Rs." (S.S.R., W.I.,
	— 1831)

Oxley being young was not wise to the ways of the Administrators. His attempt to convince the Authorities that medical aid should be readily available in any civilised place, and his argument that the expenses incurred would be offset by "the material benefits accruing to the Settlement", came to nothing. The Administration had more pressing problems to deal with. The broken-down shed continued to be used as a hospital until it was eventually abandoned.

In May 1832, the Grand Jury presented to the Court of Judicature the necessity of a hospital for sick sailors:

"It appears to the Grand Jury that a portion of such building (the Pauper Hospital) as may be erected should be set apart for the reception of sick European seamen visiting the Port. . . . The Grand Jury being deeply impressed with the necessity of providing a suitable hospital for seamen. . . ." (CHR. 1832 (a)).

The Governor forwarded the Presentment of the Grand Jury to the Government of Bengal, and asked for approval to use funds from the Pork Farm to build a hospital for European seamen. The reply which came in September 1832 informed the Governor that it would be illegal to use the proceeds of the Pork Farm for the purpose contemplated, and suggested "that this is a fit object to be provided for by public subscription amongst the Mercantile Community of the Settlement". (S.S.R., S. 2., 1832). Evidently the Government was quite set against using its funds for unprofitable projects.

In the meantime, an enterprising doctor in private practice sized the situation and started a private hospital, the first ever in Singapore. He advertised this in the newspaper on 24th May 1832 and in nine subsequent issues (CHR. 1832 (b)). Medical ethics was different then:

#### Hospital for Seamen

M. J. MARTIN, Surgeon, begs to inform Commanders of Vessels trading in this Port, that he has fitted up a House in a very desirable situation, as a Hospital for the reception of sick Europeans and other Seamen.

But the hospital charges were relatively exorbitant, and those who could not afford the fees were treated where convenient if they refused to go to the General Hospital. One such place was the Tavern.

Public conscience in the form of the Grand Jury and letters to the Press continued to urge the building of a new General Hospital:

"... A trifling circumstance occurred in my rambles a day or two ago. . . . I was tired and induced to step into the Tavern. I hobbled up stairs and in a small room, I beheld a sick naval officer stretched on a narrow bed. On enquiry, I learnt that he had lately been brought on shore very ill. My heart ever springs to naval men. . . ." (CHR. 1833 (a)).

In 1833, the Grand Jury made another Presentment on "the want of an Hospital for sick European Seamen", and received an unexpected reply from the Recorder of the Court, which echoed the official Government view:

"... As to the want of an Hospital for sick Europeans, His Honour was of the opinion that it was not the custom in England for Government to erect Hospitals of this description, ... but that private contributions were usually raised for such purposes." (CHR. 1833 (b)).

Some of the sick sailors were in Singapore because they were shipwrecked in the seas nearby. Others came ashore for medical treatment, but in the cruel times of the early 19th century, many were just abandoned in the port by their captains because they were ill and unable to work. The Governor reported one such instance to the Governor General in India in January 1834:

"I do myself the honour to enclose for the information of the Right Honourable the Governor General in Council, a Letter of Deposition taken before the Sitting Magistrate at this Settlement relative to the conduct of R. Rayne, Master of the Ship 'David Clark', by which it appears four European Seamen were put ashore at this Port from the Vessel, totally unprovided for. From my own personal knowledge, I can testify that these poor men were landed here in a state of great weakness and disease, and I, of course, was compelled to give directions for their being provisioned at the expense of Government, which, independent of Medical Attendance, amounts to \$66.62. ... I hope that Government will have the means of making the owners refund, and which might probably be effected by withholding a pass for the ship when again applied for, until the demand be complied with." (S.S.R., R. 2., 1834).

By July 1834, there was still no sign about anything being done to build a new General Hospital. Another doctor while visiting Singapore decided that the opportunities were bright and became a resident. He advertised in the Singapore Chronicle of 10th July 1834 and subsequently about his practice and hospital: (CHR. 1834).

#### Notice

MR. CHARLES WILSON, Surgeon, etc. Having resolved to remain at Singapore and exercise his profession, takes this opportunity of informing the Community of Singapore who may be pleased to employ him, that their applications will meet with immediate attention. Ship's crews promptly attended and comfortable accommodations provided on shore during their sickness, for moderate remuneration. Address: No. 2. Mr. Gemmill's New Building. P. S. Prescriptions carefully prepared by Mr. Wilson with the best medicines.

He must have done very well, for after eight months he could expand and open a Dispensary for the retail sale of drugs, and he informed his clients of this, thus: (CHR. 1835).

"To the Inhabitants of Singapore,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

For the encouragement you have given me since I first came to the Settlement, I hereby return my grateful acknowledgements. When I inform you that from my earliest days I have been engaged in the Medical Profession in London, it may perhaps induce you to assist me more than you have hitherto done.

The circumstances under which I remained here precluded the possibility of affording a supply of Medicines to those who might wish to purchase, having had only sufficient for my private practice, but now having an open Dispensary, and receiving supplies from London and Calcutta, I shall be able to accommodate those friends who may wish to favour me with their commands. I shall always prepare those prescriptions entrusted to my care from Medical Gentlemen, or private families, with my own hands, and this I hope will give more confidence to my friends.

I am, Ladies and Gentlemen, your most  
obedient Servant,  
CHAS. WILSON."

The Singapore Chamber of Commerce was founded in February 1837 "to safeguard the commercial interests of the Settlement". It was to play an important part in the history of the General Hospital.

In early 1837, there was again some agitation for the establishment of a Hospital to be maintained by contributions of private charity for the reception of European and American seamen frequenting the Port. A pamphlet was circulated among the European community outlining the objects proposed to be carried out: the raising of funds; a committee to liaise with Government and to supervise and work out the details of management; the proposed site and size of the hospital; the sharing of expenses with Government—Government to pay for the Surgeon and medicines. The circular is quoted *in extenso* as it is a very interesting historical document:

"The want of an hospital for European and American Seamen who frequent this Port being very severely felt by many suffering individuals, it is proposed to raise by donations and monthly subscriptions, a sum of money sufficient to defray the expenses of a suitable establishment and to provide for the necessities and comforts

of a class of people in whom, independent of common claims of humanity and benevolence, a commercial society must always feel a deep interest.

In furtherance of this object, the assistance of the public is now earnestly and respectfully solicited, and should this appeal meet with its anticipated success, a committee can be nominated to carry ulterior measures into effect by communicating with the Government regarding the aid which it may reasonably be expected to give, opening a contract for the building, and arranging about supervision, attendance and minor details.

To this Committee will also devolve the consideration of the sums to be paid for every seaman during his stay in the hospital, and whether contributions may not be expected from every ship that visits the Port with European or American seamen on board for whose use the establishment is peculiarly got up.

In the meantime, it is suggested that the ground near the present Chinese Hospital being accessible by water, and possessing other advantages afford a very eligible site for the proposed building. Accompanying is a sketch of what might be deemed sufficient for the present, affording every comfort for 12 patients and the means of accommodating 36 by occupying the verandahs in any case of emergency.

The Hospital being available for the use of H. M. Navy and such cases as it is incumbent on Government to provide for, it may be very reasonably hoped that the public funds should bear the whole or greater part of the expense of medicines and of a remunerating salary to the Surgeon who may be in charge.

The following estimate may perhaps be a fair approximation to the necessary monthly expenditure:

Apothecary at about	\$ (left blank)
Compounder and Dresser	\$5
Dhobie	\$5
Cook	\$3
Sweeper	\$2.50
Steady, trustworthy Steward	\$25 - \$30.

\$100 a month would be about sufficient and a saving might perhaps be expected by the use of convict labour." (S.F.P., 1837 (a)).

There were of course opponents to this scheme. They pointed out that very few seamen had been sent to the Singapore Dispensary, the private hospital, thus proving that there was no real need for a hospital. They had overlooked, probably deliberately, the fact that many sick sailors did not

go to the private hospital because they could not afford the fees. Trade unions and medical insurance were unknown then and ship-owners did not pay the hospital expenses of their sailors. The private hospital was not fully occupied not because there were no sick sailors.

The Editor of the Singapore Free Press, who strongly supported the proposal, emphasised this point forcefully on 13th April 1837:

"This is we think rather a hasty conclusion. It does not appear to have been sufficiently considered by those who have made this objection that the premises upon which they proceed, namely, the smallness of the number who have attended the Dispensary may be a consequence not of the universal freedom from disease of the seamen who have frequented the Port, but of their inability to pay the cost of their being treated and attended by a private Surgeon. This we are informed amounted at the Dispensary to \$45 a month, which there can be no doubt, we should suppose, has often been found much more than what a captain was willing to advance to his men, or if he was willing, what they were very reluctant to submit to having deducted out of their wages. It is surely not at all out of reason to suppose that this must often have been the case, and that the serious consideration of what would remain to send to his wife and children if he went to the doctor, has often driven some poor fellow to remain on board and content himself with an occasional reference to the ship's medicine chest while perhaps suffering under a complaint that required the most careful and judicious treatment. All those in such unfortunate circumstances would have come to an hospital on shore where they would have been treated and attended gratuitously or at some comparatively trivial charge if there had been such a place for them to go to. It is therefore, we think, all together erroneous in judging of the necessity there is for such an asylum here to adopt as a criterion the smallness of the number of sick seamen who attend a dispensary when they had to pay at the rate of \$45 a month. We intend here no reflection whatever upon the respectable medical gentleman in charge of the Singapore Dispensary. Only a charge which is but moderate for an European practitioner in this country may be much more than a sailor's hard-earned pittance can bear." (S.F.P., 1837 (a)).

The proposal was taken up by the Chamber of Commerce, as it had been repeatedly stressed in public that a Commercial society should be compassionate to sailors and should shoulder some res-

possibility for the health of seamen. The Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, after some weighty consideration, deemed it worthy of support and "recommended the subscription paper to be laid on the table of the Reading Room in order to give all the subscribers to that establishment who concur in their views of the utility, an opportunity of entering up their names and subscriptions." (S.F.P., 1837 (b)). Unfortunately, the scheme fell through for want of support.

In February 1838, the Grand Jury after five years of silence, presented again that "there is at present no public hospital for Europeans in the place. . . ." (S.F.P., 1838 (a)). And once again, the Recorder appealed to the business community to set an example to the Government:

" . . . Were the mercantile community however, to manifest in the first instance its accustomed liberality and humanity by voluntary contributions, it would scarcely be imagined that the Government would be backward in affording its aid to the establishment of so beneficent and desirable an institution as an hospital for European seamen . . ." (S.F.P., 1838 (a)).

The Singapore Free Press exhorted the merchants to do something for the unfortunate sailors, to stop paying lip service and do something concrete:

"As regards an hospital for European seamen, such an institution is no doubt a desideratum, and we think that the recommendation of the Recorder to the mercantile community to come forward themselves in the first place with voluntary contributions for its support ought not to pass unheeded. The number of European mercantile establishments is, it is true, so small that it would be absurd to contend that the expense of maintaining the hospital should devolve entirely upon them, but we think it not unreasonable to call upon them to evince their view of the necessity of such an establishment by the tender of some pecuniary aid. An attempt was lately made to raise subscriptions for this purpose but fell to the ground from what cause we do not exactly know, although we rather suppose because it was not sufficiently supported. . . . Whilst the merchants thus leave themselves to be reproached with so much backwardness or lukewarmness in these matters, are they likely to succeed in impressing upon others their admitted views as to the necessity which exists for the establishment of an hospital for seamen." (S.F.P., 1838 (a)).

By April 1838, there was evidence of activity among some mercantile houses of the place. They proposed petitioning the Government on the want

of a hospital for European and Native seamen, and at the same time to prove their sincerity volunteering to contribute towards building and furnishing a suitable ward in the vicinity of the Pauper Hospital. "It appears to be the general impression that the Government will do nothing of its own motion in this matter, although hopes seem to be entertained that if the merchants take the initiative in the matter now proposed, the measure will receive the countenance and pecuniary support of the Government." (S.F.P., 1838 (b)).

They had the full support of the Press. ". . . We think the merchants are very right to come forward in the manner they propose, if by doing so, it appears to them they are likely to secure the human object in view." (S.F.P., 1838 (b)).

But the merchants themselves were not unanimous in this. Several refused to subscribe on the ground that it would be ridiculous for the relatively few European merchants in the Settlement to maintain a hospital by private subscriptions. (There were only twenty European firms in Singapore then.) They contended that it was the duty of the State to provide and maintain such an institution.

Despite this opposition, Mr. Thomas McMicking, a Committee member of the Chamber of Commerce, submitted a petition to the Governor informing him that "a portion of the Mercantile Gentlemen of the place were desirous of building a ward for the reception of European and other Seamen within the precincts or adjacent to the Pauper Hospital." (S.S.R., U. 5., 1838).

The Governor, Mr. S. G. Bonham, was convinced and approved of this suggestion and requested the Resident Councillor to study the problem and to submit an estimate of the cost and the staff required. He also indicated that if the Merchants would pay the expenses, then the Government would not object to supplying the Surgeon and the medicines, but asked the Resident Councillor to make sure that this was understood by all concerned:

" . . . I am of opinion that such a place is much required, and I shall therefore be obliged by your ascertaining for what sum a commodious ward sufficient to accommodate 12 persons can be erected, and also if any and what additional Medical Subordinates will be requisite. If the Merchants and others who send the seamen are willing to pay their expenses, the Government, I should hope, would not object to afford medical aid. It is desirable, however, that this part of the question should be clearly understood between the Government and the Subscribers, and I beg therefore to refer you to Mr. McMicking who I have no doubt will

afford you any information on this or in any other point connected with the subject." (S.S.R., U. 5., 1838).

This was in June 1838. By August 1839, there was still no Seamen's Hospital. Sailors of merchant ships went to the private hospital if they had the means. The Royal Navy sent its men to the Military Hospital:

"... The reason for these men being admitted into the Military Hospital arises from the entire absence of any other Hospital to which could be sent, for our Pauper Hospital has no attendants or conveniences. . . ." (S.S.R., R. 5., 1839).

The next article in this series will describe the events leading to the building of the first European Seamen's Hospital, Singapore's fourth General Hospital.

(Pork Farm: From 1830 to 1837, there was a monopoly for selling pork in Singapore. This monopoly was auctioned to the highest bidder each year, and was called the Pork Farm).

## REFERENCES

### Abbreviations used:

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S.F.P. = Singapore Free Press. Microfilm. National Library Holdings. Singapore.

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

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