

THE ORIGINS OF THE MUNICIPAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT, SINGAPORE

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The Singapore Municipal Health Department had very humble beginnings in 1889. In 1957, when the Local Government Ordinance 1957 abolished the Municipality and made "provision for the Local Government of Singapore to be administered by the City Council of Singapore, a body incorporated by Royal Charter, and by the District Councils", it became the City Health Department. In 1963, when the Local Government Integration Ordinance 1963 integrated the functions of the City Council and Rural Board with Government, the City Health Department was absorbed into the Government Medical Services. Thus after 74 years, the Municipal Health Department lost its individual identity.

Governing Singapore during the first few decades after its founding was relatively simple. The Governor ruled either directly or indirectly through the Resident Councillor. Affairs of government included the usual "municipal services" (eg. provision and maintenance of roads and bridges, town cleaning, abatement of nuisances, etc.), which were carried out by Government officers.

When money was required for these purposes, a Committee of Assessors was appointed by the Governor. As the years went by, laws were passed to constitute a Municipal Committee. These laws also authorised the Committee to fix rates of assessment and to expend the funds for specified municipal purposes (Bengal Acts XII of 1839, XII of 1840, IX of 1848, XIV, XXV and XXVII of 1856). The Municipal Committee, however, was not very popular and was considered by the inhabitants as a "mere government bureau whose object and effect is to render the raising of money from the public more easy, and its extraction from the Government for the public use more difficult. . . ."¹

By the 1880s, the town and population of Singapore had grown big enough for the creation of a "municipality".

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The Municipal Ordinance 1887 (IX of 1887) was passed on 18th August 1887 and came into force on 1st January 1888. Amongst other things, the Governor was empowered to define the municipal boundaries and declare the number of Municipal Commissioners (nominated and elected) required to administer the affairs of the Municipality. For the first time in the laws relating to municipal government, public health was specifically mentioned. In Part IV of the Ordinance entitled "Municipal Purposes" was stated "... (f) all matters necessary for or conducive to the public safety health and convenience." Sections 194-202 of the Ordinance referred to "prevention of infectious diseases."

It was under this Ordinance that the Municipal Health Department came into being.

By the time the limits of the Municipality were defined,² and the ten Municipal Commissioners elected and nominated,³ it was already the end of January 1888. The Municipal Commissioners held their first meeting in February 1888 under the chairmanship of their President, Dr. T.I. Rowell, M.D., the Principal Civil Medical Officer of the Straits Settlements.⁴

The "Sanitary Department" of the Municipality, however, was not created until May 1889, when the services of Dr. Gilmore Ellis, a Government Medical Officer, as Health Officer, were granted by the Governor.

Dr. Ellis settled down to work immediately.⁵ It is interesting and informative to compare his work with those of his successors three-quarters of a century later.

"I took up my post as Acting Medical Officer of Health for the Town of Singapore on the 13th May 1889, since which time I have worked at least 3 hours, and usually 4 or more daily, at matters concerning the sanitary state of the Municipality.

Cow Sheds: I commenced by visiting all the cattle sheds (about 140) and many pony stables taking them district by district throughout the Town. The majority ... are badly built, worse ventilated and very dirty, many of them having their animal matter flowing into the municipal drains, and having dwelling-rooms built over them. There are but few without cesspools, those having their animal matter running into the public drains do so either by neglecting to empty their cesspools and so allowing them to run over, or by blocking the drains running into them, thus diverting the course of the matter.

... I strongly recommend that any person keeping cattle be obliged to procure a licence for the purpose from the Municipality. . . .

Slaughter Houses: All the slaughter houses of the Town, 102 in number, have also been carefully inspected by me. . . . Some are in very good order . . . but a large number are very filthy. . . . I am pleased with the information that the Municipality intends building an abattoir early next year, for I feel convinced that the closing of nearly all these small slaughter houses will be the removal of what might be the starting points of severe and epidemic diseases. It is only by frequent visits, notices and summons, that they can be kept in any order whatever.

Dye Houses, Offal Boiling Houses, Tan Yards: . . .

Lanes, Courts and Alleys: . . . Their drains should be cleaned more frequently.

Poultry: The keeping of poultry of every description in so many streets and lanes by the occupants is to be deprecated. . . .

Vacant Land, Latrines, Markets, Sewers, Town cleaning: . . .

Health: I am unable to compare the health of the Town with any previous month or year as I have no papers or statistics. . . .

Smallpox: 8 cases during the month, 4 died.

Chickenpox: One case.

Cholera: One case, fatal. . . ."

The June 1889 Report was similar:⁶

"Slaughter Houses: . . . 3661 swine within the Municipal limits.

Sago Manufactories: . . . very filthy condition.

...

Bake Houses, Dhoby Houses, Theatres: . . .

Food: . . . Fish unfit for consumption exposed for sale at the different markets. . . .

Town cleaning and Mud drains: . . . not satisfactory.

Singapore River: . . . I think it time that the night soil from Hong Lim Quay, etc. now draining into it should be otherwise removed.

Smallpox: 3 cases."

In May 1891, Dr. Ellis informed the Municipal Commissioners that he was due for four months "home leave" from Government in June.⁷ The Municipal Commissioners had two alternatives before them. They could ask Mr. Boyer, the Chief

Inspector of Nuisances, who was a qualified Apothecary, to act as Health Officer until Ellis returned, or until the Municipality could secure the services of a permanent Medical Officer. Many felt that this latter move could not be delayed any longer. At their meeting of 13th May 1891 (exactly two years after Ellis' acting appointment), the Municipal Commissioners resolved to employ their own Medical Officer. This proposal was approved by the Governor. Dr. Ellis was informed and the Commissioners instructed their "Glasgow agent to advertise in the medical newspapers".⁷

In August 1891, it was reported that "a telegram from our Home Agents speaks of many applications for this post and suggests that Dr. Ellis (on leave in England) with the assistance of one of the London Health Officers should submit the names of those which seem best qualified for the work. (The Municipal Commissioners agreed to this mode of selection). In the meantime, a good many applications are coming from India and elsewhere."⁸

Part of the September 1891 Report reads as follows: "... Further applications for the post of Health Officer continue to come in. Dr. Ellis who arrived in early October has also brought a great many from Europe where he spent much time and trouble in interviews and in making inquiries concerning applicants. . . ."⁹

Ellis returned on 5th October 1891 and was permitted by Government to continue as Acting Health Officer until the appointment of a permanent Medical Officer of Health. The Selection Committee of the Commissioners unanimously adopted Dr. Ellis' suggestion that the post be offered to Charles Eardley Dumbleton, who was then Deputy Health Officer to the parish of St. James', Westminster, London.¹⁰

Dr. Dumbleton, M.A., M.D. Cantab. left for Singapore on 15th December 1891 and was appointed the Health Officer in January 1892.¹⁰

In early March 1893, Dr. Dumbleton had to apply for Sick Leave and left for Australia on 13th March on three months' leave. Fortunately, Dr. Ellis was able and willing to undertake the duties again.¹¹ As a result of continued ill-health, Dr. Dumbleton was unable to return in June and sent in another medical certificate from Tasmania for another month's leave. The Government was applied to and allowed Dr. Ellis to continue acting as Health Officer.¹²

On 31st July 1893, letters were received from Dr. Dumbleton offering to resign because of chronic ill-health.¹³ His resignation was accepted at the meeting of the Municipal Commissioners held on 2nd August. A telegram was sent to Dr. Dumbleton but he had already embarked. On arrival in Singapore on 26th August, he withdrew his resignation. A Medical Board was convened and Dumbleton was found unfit to continue in his post.¹⁴ A Committee of the Municipal Commissioners was immediately formed to consider filling the office. They decided not to advertise but to contact the candidates who had applied in 1891. They also resolved that the possession of the Diploma in Public Health (D.P.H.) should be a requisite qualification for the appointment.¹⁵

When Dr. W.R.C. Middleton, who had been in private practice in Singapore for several years, heard of the vacancy, he applied for the job. He offered to do the D.P.H. at his own expense if selected. Impressed by his local knowledge and experience, the Municipal Commissioners employed him as Acting Health Officer for three months from 1st January 1894.¹⁶ On 21st March 1894, Dr. Middleton handed over charge to Dr. Ellis and left for the United Kingdom.¹⁷ When he returned on 28th October with the D.P.H. from Aberdeen University, Dr. Middleton was given the substantive appointment of Health Officer of the Singapore Municipality.¹⁸ He then began to build up his department.

Middleton Hospital for Infectious Diseases is named after him.

REFERENCES

Abbreviations Used:

GAZETTE = Straits Settlements Government Gazette.
University of Singapore Holdings.

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