

THE ORIGINS OF NURSING IN SINGAPORE

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From time immemorial, the sick and the injured have been nursed by their families, relatives, friends and other helpers. In this article, the word "nurse" is used in a technical sense, and refers specifically to a female who has been carefully selected and systematically and professionally trained, and the care she lavished on the patients (usually in the hospital setting) referred to as "nursing". In Singapore, nursing evolved slowly. The hospitals started by using untrained females to help look after female patients, and then gradually having professional nurses to tend to all patients.

When Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore on 28th January 1819, there was a medical team with his troops. This military medical team was all male and consisted of a Surgeon, medical subordinates (Apothecaries), dressers and orderlies. The first hospital established in Singapore was the Military Hospital, and the nursing there was carried out by the medical subordinates, dressers, orderlies and patients. (A dresser was a Surgeon's assistant in a hospital whose duty it was to dress wounds, sores, etc.)

Later, when there were Civil Hospitals, they had the same grades of staff except that some of the subordinate members were convicts from India. (Singapore was then a penal colony for Indian convicts).

In the early Singapore hospitals, there was no need for female staff as women in those days did not go to hospital. They were treated at home and gave birth to their children at home.

Later developments in Singapore included an increase in the population with a change in the sex ratio. Although the population was still overwhelmingly male, there were greater numbers of women. There were also more hospitals, and when women began to be admitted into them, the problem of how to care for them arose.

In December 1852, the full-time staff of Tan Tock Seng's Hospital consisted only of one Assistant Apothecary, two dressers, two coolies and one peon. They were expected to look after 170 patients. The Medical Officer in charge of the Hospital, Assistant Surgeon James Cowpar, found that it was quite impossible to cope with the situation. In January 1853, he wrote in to ask for an increase in the establishment and took the opportunity to request for a female member of staff (the first instance in Singapore's medical history) (1).

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"A female attendant is very essential. An aged and destitute woman was sent to hospital a few months since by the Superintendent of Police with both legs broken from an accident. Very serious difficulty was experienced in procuring the services of a female attendant to aid and assist the unfortunate patient."

This request for an increased establishment was turned down by the Governor (2).

In June 1861, patients were moved to the new Tan Tock Seng Hospital situated at Balestier's Plain. Although there was a Female Ward (built from funds specially donated by Mrs Tan Tock Seng), no arrangements had been made to staff it with women (3):

"... We have of late been much inconvenienced by the want of a female attendant at the Women's Ward, their diseases being of that nature that such is indispensable. Dr Cowpar has suggested that one of the convict women should be attached to the Ward as a nurse. If one could be got to undertake the duty it would be a great blessing to the poor bed-ridden creatures."

(In those early times, the word "nurse" used in official letters and reports referred to a female who helped to care for the sick or infirm, not to a professionally qualified nurse.)

In 1856, when plans were made to build a new General Hospital and a new Lunatic Asylum in the Kandang Kerbau district, there were provisions for the treatment of female patients. (The old hospital and lunatic asylum did not have wards for women). The establishment for the new hospitals accordingly had a post for a female attendant (4). This however was not approved.

By 1866, there was still no female attendant in the General Hospital, although returns in the Annual Report showed that patients had been treated for gynaecological complaints or had given birth there (5).

Another attempt was made to get a female attendant in January 1867. It was suggested that she should work in both the General Hospital and the Lunatic Asylum for 22 Rupees per month (6):

"The nurse though attached to the Lunatic Asylum would be required to attend equally upon the patients in the adjoining General Hospital as upon Insanes. At present, the only attendants at both establishments are male convicts. There are always at one or the other of the two institutions patients in the female wards, and it is consequently highly desirable for many reasons that a nurse should be entertained for the purpose of taking charge of them."

This proposal was approved, and for the first time in Singapore's history, a female employee worked in the Medical Department (7).

In 1873, there was a cholera epidemic in Singapore. It started in the Kandang Kerbau district where the General Hospital and the Lunatic Asylum were situated. Patients from the General Hospital were quickly moved to the Sepoy Lines. After the epidemic was contained, the patients did not return to the General Hospital as the Kandang Kerbau district was considered unhealthy. They remained in the Sepoy Lines, part of which was converted into a temporary hospital. A new General Hospital and a new Lunatic Asylum were erected in the Sepoy Lines locality. The new General Hospital was opened on 1st August 1882, and professional nursing in Singapore owed its origins to the men who planned the building and staffing of this hospital.

By this time (the 1870s and early 1880s), there were already Schools of Nursing in the United Kingdom; the most famous one, the Nightingale Training School at

St Thomas's Hospital, London, had been founded in 1860. The British doctors who had been trained in the United Kingdom and who staffed and administered the Medical Service in Singapore knew of professional nursing and they wanted it for the Singapore hospitals, especially the new General Hospital.

But their pleas and recommendations fell on the deaf ears of the administrators. They were told that it would be difficult to recruit nurses from the United Kingdom to serve in Singapore, and to wait and see if the new General Hospital could function without nurses as had been the practice.

In 1883, the Principal Civil Medical Officer and the Surgeon in charge of the General Hospital submitted their reports (8). The Surgeon stated:

"The two great drawbacks to satisfactory treatment of patients are the inferior quality of the native servants and the absence of proper nursing.

The absence of proper nursing is a great evil, and is especially felt by the inmates of the Officers' Ward. For ordinary nursing wants, the patients are dependent on the Chinese servants, and the bad cases are nursed by the Ward Steward, Apothecaries and Dressers (who all have quite enough of their own work to attend to), helped sometimes by other patients. I think that this hospital, considering its size and importance, and probably increasing future usefulness, should be provided with a female nursing staff. A sufficient staff for the present would consist of a Matron and two Nurses, the two Nurses taking day and night duties in alternate weeks. The Matron would exercise supervision over the Nurses, be responsible for the administration of the patients' medicine and stimulants, and also, possibly, have charge of the patients' clothing and bedding, and the laundry ...

With regard to the class of women to be chosen, I would recommend that they be selected in England from a good training school, such as the Nightingale Institution at St Thomas's Hospital or some similar place, and that sufficient salary be offered to secure the services of really experienced women. I think that the Matron should receive, say, \$60 a month, and the Nurses \$40 a month each; with quarters and rations for all, and probably an allowance of clothes.

The advantages to the patients and to the Surgeon in charge of the Hospital, as well as to the Apothecaries and Dressers, from the appointment of Nurses, would be very considerable, and such appointment would, I am confident, lead to a reduction in the staff of servants, their work at the same time being better done. I have no doubt also that the fact that proper nursing could be obtained at the General Hospital would cause more patients to seek admission, especially to the Officers' Ward."

The Principal Civil Medical Officer supported the Surgeon in charge of the General Hospital, but he preferred to get nurses from India:

"... The question of proper trained nursing for this hospital is a most important one, and I entertain every hope that Government will at once consider and take action ... The matter has long been talked of and discussed, and its necessity recognised, but till the hospital assumed its present importance, it was not brought prominently forward. I have already been in communication with the Head Matron of the Madras Infirmary to see whether we could not be supplied with trained hospital nurses from that town, but the reply received was to the

effect that, though they are to be had there easily enough, they cannot be induced to leave their country for the Straits.

This is a pity, as the style of nurses procurable from Madras would probably, for climatic and other reasons which I need not name, be found in the long run, to suit us better than we could obtain from England.

I trust, however, that early steps will now be taken to supply us, in the best way possible, with a full staff of efficient and trained nurses."

The Governor was convinced of the need for better nursing and of having trained nurses in the General Hospital, and he instructed his officials to study the problem and come up with something concrete.

The plan was to recruit nuns from the Convent in Singapore and train them locally as it was not possible to obtain nurses from the United Kingdom or India. The nuns were the only European women in Singapore who were prepared to do this type of work, as the majority of the other European women were wives and daughters of Government officials, prosperous merchants and professional men.

The proposal was approved, and in the Estimates for 1885 there was a new vote for salaries for European Nurses. The proposal, however, stirred up a hornets' nest (see below).

Opposition to the scheme was on religious and chauvinistic grounds, and was publicly expressed for the first time on 18th November 1884 in the Legislative Council debates on the Estimates for 1885 (9).

Mr Addis, an Unofficial Member (who was acting for Mr Graham who was on leave), said that no one would quarrel about the need to have European Nurses in the General Hospital. It was the means of getting them that he objected to. He was of the opinion that the nurses should be recruited in Britain, and emphasised that the nuns because of the rules of their Order were most unsuitable for nursing. He was careful to state that he did not object to Roman Catholic nurses, but that he was definitely against the hospitals being under the control of a foreign religious order:

"... I apprehend there can be but one opinion as to the advisability of introducing European Nurses in the Hospital, but I am not so sure this Council will be unanimous upon the scheme for supplying them. One would have thought the natural way to proceed would be to send home and bring out trained nurses — women such as we have in London, Edinburgh and other great centres of medical science. Now, the proposition, as I understand it, is to go to a French colony, to go to Saigon and bring a member of an ecclesiastical order who is trained for the work, and who will recruit from the local convent three Sisters to be nurses in our hospital. The sole advantage, to my mind, of the proposed scheme is that it would be an economical one. We shall save the passage money from home of three or four trained nurses. There is also a secondary advantage ... that those Sisters from Saigon or from our Convent may be good linguists, good modern linguists, and so able to converse with and understand the desires of foreign sailors and others in our hospitals who may not be conversant with English ... The disadvantages are, on the other hand, to my way of thinking, very obvious and on the surface. I do not know whether all of us are aware that this Order of St Vincent de Paul is precluded by its rules from any knowledge of the procreation of the species. In other words, it prevents them from attending midwifery cases. I do

not know what other members may think, but to my mind, it is a monstrous thing that a woman, who is a professional nurse, should turn her back upon a suffering sister in her hour of need. Another rule of the Society of St Vincent de Paul is that they are precluded by the rules of their body from looking upon the exposed body, and I leave it to the imagination of Honourable Members to decide in how many cases this may interfere with their usefulness. Our Principal Civil Medical Officer thinks he would be able to manage these Sisters more easily and with less friction than trained nurses from home. I beg humbly and respectfully to differ from him, and I also understand that his professional brethren who have had experience of the nurses of this Order in London hospitals also differ from him. I trust that these short remarks will not be misunderstood. Of course, I do not object to the nurses in the Hospital being Roman Catholics; in fact, the nurses from home might be Roman Catholics; but I do object, on principle, to handing over the nursing in our hospitals to the members of any ecclesiastical body whatever under foreign jurisdiction..."

Mr Addis also accused the Government of being very casual about the recruitment of European Nurses, and said that Members of the Council had not been told of the intentions of Government.

This was denied by the Acting Colonial Secretary and the Officer Administering the Government (the Governor was on leave) (9). The Acting Colonial Secretary reminded Mr Addis that at the Finance Committee meeting he had expressed his objections and had examined and cross-examined the Principal Civil Medical Officer who had recommended the scheme. The Officer Administering the Government said that Mr Addis was not justified in the remarks he had made as a special memorandum had been prepared and circulated to Members. He continued:

"... Now, I wish to state that in proposing to have nurses from the Convent of Singapore (I know nothing about getting them from Saigon), we look only to securing an efficient staff of nurses. It is impossible to get a regular supply from any of the leading institutions in England having trained nurses capable of carrying on such work as that required. It is impossible for those associations to spare us nurses, and we should have either to go to second class institutions, or to engage nurses individually selected, and that, I need hardly say, would not work satisfactorily at a distance of 8,000 miles from the source of supply. I am glad to hear from the Honourable Member that he has no objections to the scheme on the score of such nurses being Roman Catholics. If I am not wrong, the majority of the patients who find their way into the hospitals of the Colony are members of that Church; if therefore, we are to treat the matter from a religious point of view, we should select Roman Catholics rather than those belonging to any other Church; but, as I stated, there is no desire to look upon it in a religious point of view at all. Our only object is that of getting and maintaining a staff of efficient nurses, and we propose to get them from the Convent, so that, if any one should not prove satisfactory, she can be immediately sent back; while the plan, if it is a failure, can be put an end to in one month. I trust the Honourable Member and others who perhaps may not approve of the scheme, will not object to it, seeing that it is specially recommended as the best by the Officer

of Government who is charged with the duty of supervising the administration of the hospitals, namely, the Principal Civil Medical Officer."

At the next meeting two days later, the Legislative Council went into Committee on the Bill for making provision for the Public Service for the year 1885. When the vote for the Medical Department came up for discussion, Mr Addis continued his attack (10). He dismissed as irrelevant what the Acting Colonial Secretary and the Acting Governor had said at the last meeting. He wanted to know why it was possible to recruit schoolmistresses from Britain and not nurses, and argued that there were few Catholic patients in the hospitals. He had no objections to Roman Catholics, he only wanted a fair deal for British women:

"... I was prepared for something more than the assertion that because we were 8,000 miles from the mother-country, it was impossible on that account, to obtain trained nurses. I would ask Your Excellency how it is that it is so possible to have certificated schoolmistresses at Raffles Girls' School. There we have three certificated schoolmistresses, and I think there is but one opinion about those mistresses, that they are in every respect most admirable. Why, therefore, is it so impossible to obtain a few certificated nurses from the mother-country, who, in their different sphere, would be equally admirable? Your Excellency went on to say you were glad to hear I had no objection to their being Roman Catholics. Why I should have any objection, I know not. I have none. But Your Excellency further said, or at least implied, that it was an advantage to have our nurses members of that Church, because, in your opinion, the majority of the patients were Roman Catholics ... I beg to think otherwise, and believe that, upon examination, it would be found to be not the case ... But I will merely add that I do confess to a feeling of jealousy that the Government should neglect our sisters at home, and refuse to open out to them honourable and useful careers, and prefer to go to a French colony, where we have not the least jot or tittle of evidence to show that we should thereby secure more efficient nurses..."

The Acting Chief Justice (Mr T T Ford) was more vehement in his objections especially on religious grounds (10). He strongly objected to the nursing in the hospitals being under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholics. He was prepared to accept the scheme if there were no other means of getting trained nurses. But he wanted the Government to offer higher salaries to nurses from Britain before saying they were not willing to come to Singapore:

"I would make a few observations because I concur very much in what has been said by the Honourable Member who has just spoken. It seems to me obvious that in principle there are great and serious drawbacks to handing over the nursing of our hospitals to any ecclesiastical corporation whatsoever, and it seems to me that those inconveniences are doubled by handing them over to a foreign corporation. I also think that the religious difficulty, though it is one which it is always desired to keep in the background, is one of little more difficulty than has been assumed, and I have had the opportunity of reading a letter from Dr Henderson, who is in charge of the hospital at Shanghai, where the system has prevailed, in which he speaks of there having been some difficulties upon that head ... Therefore, while we should all regret exaggeration of this difficulty, I do not think we ought altogether

to put it aside. Then, Sir, is it quite possible after all, however much we may wish to do so, to hide our eyes from what we may call the rivalry between the Churches? If we were to follow the course proposed, it seems to me we should be giving a somewhat undue advantage to the Roman Catholic Church here, for when once these ladies are in charge of the Hospital as nurses, no others will be allowed there. You must either have them altogether and no one else, or not at all. Now, I do not know, Sir, why the nurses who may be members of the Church of England, which is the established Church of this Colony, or of other Churches, why they are to be entirely excluded from the hospitals of the Government; but that would be, it seems to me, the practical effect of the scheme which the Government has in view. These, to me, constitute strong prima facie objections to it. Now, are there any strong reasons for pursuing the scheme notwithstanding? I quite concur in this — that if we were unable to get these nurses in any other way, all objections to the scheme fall through; but I am not aware that there is any difficulty whatsoever in procuring trained European nurses. At all events, I think, before we adopt this scheme, that a trial might be made. We have hospitals in various parts of the world with nurses. We have them throughout India, at Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and other places. I never heard any question of handing over the nursing in those hospitals to any religious body whatsoever, and I have not the least doubt that if we made the trial, and if adequate incomes were offered to persons from home, they could be got... I do not think we should object to spend a little more to give our sick people a little more comfort in the shape of nurses of their own country, and of their own religious persuasions..."

The Officer Administering the Government (Mr Cecil Clementi Smith) pointed out that the rules of procedure forbade discussion in the absence of a motion before the Council. If any member desired to bring forward a motion on a future occasion, he was prepared to arrange that the money would not be spent until that motion had been discussed. The vote then passed.

At a subsequent Legislative Council meeting (22nd January 1885) (11), Mr Addis asked permission to adjourn his motion on the subject of the scheme for procuring European nurses for the General Hospital, because he wanted time for the inhabitants of Singapore to hold a public meeting to debate the matter. The Officer Administering the Government commented that the subject had been before the public since October 1884, and if there was any strong feeling, there had been plenty of time to hold a meeting; and if the public press was to be regarded as an indication of public feeling, that feeling was not as the Honourable Member wished it to be. Mr Addis retorted that nobody knew of the arrangements that had been made with the Bishop or the Sisters. The Officer Administering the Government replied that no secret arrangements had been made. And after a desultory discussion, the motion was adjourned.

While all the bickering was going on in the Legislative Council, the doctors were kept in suspense but were hopeful. The Principal Civil Medical Officer stated in the 1884 Annual Report (12):

"The varying nature of the work of the Apothecaries will, I think, be modified after the question of the appointment of nurses, now under consideration, is settled, as the nurses will be able to do many things

for the bad cases at present the Apothecaries are unable to leave to the subordinate officers."

On 23rd March 1885, the Officer Administering the Government informed the Secretary of State for the Colonies what he proposed to do, and announced, rather prematurely, that opposition to the scheme had died down (see below, the petition) (13):

"The Medical Officers have again pressed on attention the necessity for procuring nurses for the hospitals. I was in hopes that I might ere this have definitely brought the subject under Your Lordship's notice, but the scheme recommended by Dr Rowell and approved by Sir F Weld and myself, met with a certain opposition, based, I believe, on religious grounds which met with little sympathy and has now died out. It is proposed to try the experiment in Singapore of obtaining nurses from the Society of St Vincent de Paul de Chartres, the Sisters of which have an establishment in Singapore, and also in Saigon. The European Hospital in Shanghai has been for nearly twenty years supplied with nurses from this source, and the Doctors speak in the highest terms of the way in which they perform their duties. The branch society in Singapore is ready to take the matter up at once. By this means the Government will obtain the services of three or four efficient nurses at an exceedingly cheap rate, and should anyone of them unhappily break down, her place can be supplied without delay. Votes have been taken in the Estimates for the current year to pay the salaries of the nurses which will be about thirty dollars a month each, and also for building their quarters. The difficulty of getting nurses from England are patent, and even if were feasible, in any case where the health of such a nurse gave way, months would elapse before her place could be filled by a fresh arrival. Another advantage to be gained by obtaining nurses from the French Sisterhood is that they are good linguists and this is of great importance in view of the different nationalities to which the European sick belong."

However, at the Legislative Council meeting held the next day (24th March 1885), Mr Graham, who had returned from leave, presented a petition signed by 144 European residents of Singapore against the scheme for providing the hospitals with nurses from the Convent (14). The petition was signed by three ex-members of the Legislative Council, "by the medical men not connected with the Government; by all the Protestant clergy; by all the barristers but one; and by the principal merchants and bankers." Mr Graham also mentioned that although no Government official had been asked to sign, dissatisfaction with the scheme was as widespread among the official as among the non-official community. He said that the opinion of the acting Chief Justice was well-known and had been expressed forcefully in the Council, and that the opposition was founded on the belief that the scheme was the plot of the Roman Catholic bishop. It was thought that he was intriguing to set up a sort of *imperium in imperio* in the hospitals, and that he, and not the Principal Civil Medical Officer, would soon be the Head of the Medical Department. Mr Graham himself was not against the scheme on religious grounds. He promised, "If I get the assurance of the Government that the nurses to be provided under the proposed scheme are efficient trained nurses, I shall not take up that resolution, nor will I lead the opposition to the scheme." This assurance was given.

THE PETITION

To His Excellency the Acting Governor, and
the Honourable Legislative Council of
the Straits Settlements

The Humble Petition of the undersigned,
Inhabitants of Singapore

SHEWETH:

Your petitioners have learnt from the recent reports of your proceedings in Council that a scheme is now before Your Excellency and Council for providing European nurses for the hospitals of this Colony, or at least for one of them, under which the management and appointment of these nurses would be placed entirely in the hands of an ecclesiastical organisation.

Your petitioners beg respectfully to point out that the effect of such a scheme, namely, the handing over the nursing of the patients of the hospitals to members of a particular religious association to the exclusion of the other nurses who may be of a different religious persuasion, would be objectionable and very unacceptable to a large portion of the European community.

Your petitioners consider the scheme to be open to much objection, inasmuch as it would confer upon one religious body an exclusive privilege in connection with a public and undenominational institution, and would thus exclude from employment other trained nurses, or those to be trained, who are members of other religious bodies.

Your petitioners desire respectfully to point out that the majority of the patients in the hospital are members of other religious bodies than that to which the proposed religious Sisterhood belongs. The Clergy and others of all denominations are in the habit of visiting the patients regularly. It would be very unsatisfactory to them to think that members of their flock were to be constantly subjected directly or indirectly to the influence of nurses, who by their creed are hostile (conscientiously though it be) to all forms of the Christian faith other than their own. It is undesirable, therefore, that the nurses should belong exclusively to such a religious organisation as that proposed.

Another objection is that the nurses are to be not English women but foreigners (as is believed) speaking a language but little represented in the hospital.

Your petitioners are fully impressed with the necessity of procuring trained and efficient nurses for the hospitals, but they would respectfully suggest to Your Excellency and Council the very obvious desirability of endeavouring, in the first place, to procure them from home or India or elsewhere (no effort having been made by the Government as far as we are aware of to do this).

Your petitioners beg respectfully to urge that it is inexpedient to adopt the proposed scheme before it has been satisfactorily shown that it is impossible to procure properly trained nurses from England or elsewhere, who shall be solely subject to the Medical Authorities. That relationship would very doubtfully exist if the nursing body were all subject to foreign Ecclesiastical Authorities.

If the proposed scheme be adopted, it will, however unintentionally, be sure to arouse and keep up feelings of religious hostility among a large section of the community.

The possibility of a slight increase in the cost of pro-

curing nurses from another source, your petitioners respectfully submit, ought not to weigh against the objections to the scheme.

Your Petitioners, therefore, humbly pray Your Excellency and Council to take the above matters into consideration and to postpone adopting the above-mentioned scheme until attempts have been made to procure trained nurses for the hospitals from England or elsewhere.

And your petitioners will ever pray, etc.

144 NAMES"

The Officer Administering the Government in forwarding the petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies apologised for having misinformed His Lordship that opposition had died down. After explaining what had happened, he ended by declaring that there would always be religious bigots, that he did not think the petition expressed the views of all the Europeans in Singapore, and enumerated the advantages of the proposed scheme (15):

"... Being sure that the subject would create a certain amount of feeling in the Colony, I have taken pains to ensure that it should be fully discussed. It was hopeless to expect that, however excellent the proposal might be, the religious element in it could be eliminated. Many good and worthy people will not look at any scheme with which Roman Catholics are to be connected, and I am free to confess that could I have seen my way to recommending the engagement of trained nurses from some source wholly secular, I should have preferred it, mainly on the ground that it is unadvisable in a Colony of this kind to introduce anything that may tend to create religious dissensions.

I have no reason whatever to believe that the petition represents the views of anything approaching to a majority of the residential Europeans. It is signed by only 144 persons, while according to the Census of 1881, there are 815 male Europeans and Americans in the Settlement of Singapore. The number is now probably greater. And if the opinions of the local Press are to be taken as indicating public opinion, I should point to the fact that without exception, it has advocated the Government scheme.

I enclose copy of a minute by Dr Rowell on the petition, and I may, in support of his views, summarise the advantages of the scheme as follows:

- (1) that it has been proved by the experience of about 18 years in the General Hospital, Shanghai, to work to the satisfaction of the Doctor and the community at large.
- (2) that it ensures a constant supply of nurses, in case of sickness among them, as their places can be at once supplied from the Institution here or in Saigon.
- (3) that the nurses will be under strict discipline; will be non-marrying; are precluded by their rules from proselytizing, and by the same rules, are bound to strictly obey the order of the Doctor.
- (4) that the nurses will be able to speak foreign languages.
- (5) that it is a very economical scheme.
- (6) that it can be, at short notice, changed should it be found unsatisfactory from any cause whatever.
- (7) that it is as recommended by the Principal Civil Medical Officer and the Resident Surgeon of the Hospital.
- (8) that after enquiries in Calcutta and Madras,

and also in England, there seems no prospect of obtaining efficient and trained nurses from any other Institution."

The Officer Administering the Government's statement that public opinion as expressed in the Press was in favour of the Government scheme was soon vindicated. The petition was published in the Straits Times, and the editorial was highly critical of it, stating that it was "uncalled for" and "a very silly document", and that the sole criterion for the selection of nurses should be efficiency and adequate training. However, the Editor agreed that it was imprudent to have all the nurses belonging to one religious sect: (16)

"... Without possessing the faintest sympathy with any attempts at improper or injudicious proselytizing, we cannot help thinking that the petition was quite uncalled for ... Nurses who do their duty, and the Sisters of Mercy, to take one particular class, certainly do theirs, have very little time indeed for the argument and discussion involved in altering a man's religious belief ... To the objection that the nurses will be foreigners, and consequently be unable to communicate with the doctors and patients, we should, were it true, attach every weight. But surely that is a matter regarding which due care will be taken before selection? And if they should be so unable to communicate with others, where would be the danger to their influence, direct or indirect, over the patients committed to their care? We as little wish to see the hospital turned into an auxiliary Catholic mission as to see it Protestant or Buddhist or Hindu. Any religious conversation, except at the expressed wish of a patient, and that only with the duly recognised ministers of the belief he inclines to, should, we quite grant, be forbidden.

The one thing absolutely necessary is that the nurses be trained and efficient, but we see no more reason why they should be all Protestant than all Mohamedan. As for being 'solely subject to the medical authorities', the discipline of the hospital will have strangely deteriorated when they are not. The fact is that misplaced zeal has led to the presentation of a very silly document. Its whole tenor and value are well exemplified by its combining two such objections as that the nurses will talk English so well as to acquire undue religious influence over their patients, while they will also be 'foreigners speaking a language but little represented in the hospital'. The one sensible remark in the whole petition is that it is undesirable that the nurses should belong exclusively to any religious organisation. With that we entirely concur."

One petitioner even wrote to the Editor to make his stand clear: (17)

"... I was one who signed the petition and did so simply on the broad principle that it would be injudicious to introduce nurses exclusively of one religious denomination into institutions where patients of all denominations were admitted. The scheme, I presumed, had originated with the powers that be. I never heard that it owed its origin to any ecclesiastic, and I believe many who signed the petition were as ignorant as myself of the Machiavellian scheme propounded. ... I know how bigoted some Protestants are, and to them, even lying on a sick bed, the sight of a Sister belonging to a sect not their own would be most injurious, and therefore felt that the nurses should be trained nurses from home not confined to one religious

denomination....”

Despite the opposition, the scheme was put into operation and the nuns assumed their duties as nurses in the General Hospital on 1st August 1885 (exactly three years after the hospital was officially opened).

They must have performed their duties well for the Resident Surgeon, Dr Simon, was quite ecstatic when he wrote his Annual Report (18):

“... I am glad to report that, during the year, the introduction of Female Nurses has become an accomplished fact.”

The nurses are Sisters from the Convent in Singapore, and they entered on their duties on August 1st. They have shewn, and are shewing, great interest in their work, and are very careful and quick to learn. The improvement in the appearance of the hospital wards since the nurses came is very marked, and the relief given to the Surgeon and the Apothecaries in their attendance on bad cases is already great, and will in time be greater.

The question of attendants is still a somewhat vexed one. The attendance of the boys in the wards has improved greatly since the introduction of the nurses, but the rate of pay offered will only draw inferior Chinese boys, and they are continually giving trouble I am afraid, however, that any anticipation that the introduction of nurses would lead to a diminution in the number of native servants required will not be realised.” (Was it because the nurses were not willing to take over part of the servants’ work, or because the nurses were unable to make the servants work harder?)

The Governor, Sir Frederick Weld, was so pleased with the project that he sent a copy of a letter from the Principal Civil Medical Officer to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and he was prepared to vouch for all the improvements in the hospital (19):

“I have the honour to transmit for your information a copy of a letter which has been received from Dr Rowell, the Principal Civil Medical Officer, bearing strong testimony to the worth and usefulness of the nurses of the Society of St Vincent de Paul at the General Hospital. I have visited the hospital and can bear personal testimony to the improved appearance of the wards and rooms and its extreme neatness and air of comfort.”

And the Editor of the Straits Times in a leader “The Female Hospital Nurses” on 24th February 1886, echoed the sentiments of Dr Simon (20).

In 1886, the nurses continued their house-keeping duties and on-job training in the practical aspects of nursing. But the Resident Surgeon of the General Hospital had plans for a more organised course of training including lectures. He also wanted the nursing at night to be improved by recruiting more nurses (21):

“... The Sisters also have continued their work well, to the benefit and increased comfort of the patients. Up to the end of the year, their attention has been confined to practical work, i.e. carrying out instructions given to them with reference to patients, and to learning such details of nursing as have been found necessary in the cases they have had to take care of. During 1887, I intend to give them a course of theoretical teaching, and also instructions in practical nursing in a more systematic way, so that I hope, in the next Annual Report, to be able to say that this hospital possesses a staff of skilled nurses.

There are, however, some details of the nursing

department which, I think, can be improved. I do not consider that the staff of European Sisters is large enough, especially to ensure effectual night nursing throughout the hospital, but this and other minor matters I intend to make the subject of a special communication, with the hope, if my suggestions are carried out, of ensuring thorough and efficient nursing both by day and night. ...”

1887 saw the Sisters continuing to work satisfactorily and conscientiously carrying out instructions given to them. But the night nursing did not improve. In fact, the staffing situation as a whole became worse because the best Nursing Sister was sent to Penang to instruct the Sisters who had begun nursing duties in the hospital there. Dr Simon was not getting whole-hearted cooperation from the Convent administrators (22):

“... Before Dr Rowell went away in April, a change was promised by the Convent authorities in this respect (night nursing), but no change has yet been made... It is to be regretted that the Convent, knowing that Sisters would be required for Penang, and having volunteered to supply them, should not have during this year, taken opportunity to send some Sisters here for some training in their work rather than have let them wait for instructions until they had taken up their duties....”

The employment of European nurses, although of benefit to the patients and the Surgeon, was not without adverse effect on the subordinate medical staff who were not Europeans. The Apothecaries, who were most of them Eurasians locally recruited or from India, and who considered themselves the assistants to the British Medical Officers, felt the consequences very acutely. Prior to the coming of the European nurses, they ruled supreme in the hospitals, running them for the Medical Officers. They were indispensable. Their power was quickly eroded and taken over by the European nurses. One of them was bitter enough to write to the Madras Mail detailing their fate and discouraging others from seeking employment in the Straits Settlements (23):

“... Management of the General Hospital, supposed to be the first hospital in the Straits Settlements is under the Sisters from the Convent, who are under the control of the Bishop. Paid liberally by Government, but with no nursing training. Nursing and dieting of patients are in their hands. The Apothecary does not inspect the food supplied by the contractor ... Ward attendants and other menial servants are also under the control of the Sisters.... If the Apothecary has any orders to convey to the servants, they must go through the Sisters, or if he chooses to give them directly to the servants, he must stand the risk of being humiliated by being disobeyed without any means of getting the culprit punished. The whole hospital, in fact, is under a sort of feminine control guided by the religious authorities, and the Apothecary, who in an Indian hospital, is considered competent to take the place of the Medical Officer in his absence, in the Straits hospital is thought of no more than a ward attendant....”

This letter was re-printed in the Penang Gazette and the Straits Times, and was the subject of leaders in the columns of the Straits Independent (a Penang newspaper), the Penang Gazette and the Singapore Weekly Herald.

The Straits Independent took the side of the Apothecary (24):

“... The writer enters into a description of the

management of the hospital, and complains that certain duties which legitimately devolve on the Apothecaries are entrusted to Nurses.... We are at a loss to understand why a Nurse should be called upon to look after the dieting and articles of diet supplied to the patients, or that the ward attendants and other servants should be placed under the control of the Nurses and be independent of the Apothecaries. This arrangement would place the latter in an invidious position, and give rise to dissatisfaction, heartburning and other evils by which the patients must ultimately suffer in one way or another. As a rule, we believe Apothecaries attached to hospitals are looked upon as officers having a certain amount of control in the management of the internal economy of the hospitals, hence the attendants and other servants are specially under their orders, as well as the ordering and receiving of the rations for the patients as regulated by the Medical Officer in charge. If a change in these respects has been considered necessary in the management of the hospital referred to by the writer, the person who introduced the change must have had very good and exceptional reasons for it. We know nothing of this, nevertheless, we think it is a change calculated to engender discontent and jealousy...."

The Penang Gazette observed, (25), "Regarding the nursing, there is some truth in the Madras Apothecary's statement, but it is preferable to have the religious Sisters than to have no trained nurses at all. ... Ridiculous for the Sisters to be in charge of the food and servants. Apothecary and Nurse in positions exactly the reverse of what we imagine they ought to be. It is absurd and humiliating that trained and competent men, such as the most of our Apothecaries are, should be placed in so utterly false a position; and we do not wonder that they resent it."

The Singapore Weekly Herald sneered and jeered that the Madras Apothecary had complained because the European Nurses had put an end to his lucrative corrupt practices (26):

".... Concerning his remarks about the Sisters, they are very absurd. The Sisters from the Convent in Singapore have been in charge of the hospital some four or five years; during this length of time they have given every satisfaction to the Government, the Chief Medical Officers and the patients. We declare the inspection of the articles by the Sisters, though in able hands, is somewhat galling to the Madras Apothecary. Our friend came to Singapore with the intention of being on the war path, that is, on the make. He expected to be able to fleece the contractor the same as he was able to do in Madras. In this he has been disappointed, and we would advise him to get back as soon as possible to Madras where he can have the contractors under his thumb. It is a good thing for the patients that the General Hospital in Singapore is under feminine control, and they know and appreciate it. Left to the tender mercies of the Madras Apothecary they would stand a very poor chance indeed.

As to what the Apothecary says about the ward servants, it is nothing but right that the Sisters should have full control over them as in other matters. We have seen something of hospital management in India, and in many cases, servants that are paid by the Government to attend on the patients are merely servants to some of the Apothecaries and their families. There are tricks and makings in every trade that is sure. But when the Apothecary from Madras found out that he was nothing but a ward attendant, and had nothing else to do but to mix and compound pills and nostrums,

and no chance to make a cent, like a sensible being he should either have given a grin and bore with it or taken his flight to his native country — Madras!"

The Madras Apothecary was not the only one against the nuns, "an English lady" wrote to the Straits Times on 19th July 1889 (27):

".... This, as an English colony, should be a field for English labour, i.e. a safety valve for the markets at home glutted with applicants seeking to earn honest livelihoods. ... In this English-governed city of Singapore, we find posts that might be filled by English ladies given to foreigners. Why is the General Hospital here handed over entirely to the management of Roman Catholic French nuns who have not even received a special training, while Protestant English nurses are refused admittance on account of their religion, and the institution that might have proved a grand opening for nurses who had passed their probation at home is shut out from them."

All these complaints were of no avail. No changes were instituted by Government. Two new Sisters were recruited in 1889 (28), and in 1890 the Resident Surgeon wrote, "The Sisters have worked well during the year and given every satisfaction. Two of them had to go away during the year, but these have now returned in good health." (29)

Professional nursing had come to Singapore to stay.

REFERENCES

ABBREVIATIONS USED:

- A.R. Annual Report of the Medical Department, Singapore.
 LEGCO Proceedings of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. Microfilm. National Library Holdings, Singapore.
 P.G. Penang Gazette. Microfilm. National Library Holdings, Singapore.
 S.S.R. Straits Settlements Records. Microfilm. National Library Holdings, Singapore.
 S.T. Straits Times. Microfilm. National Library Holdings, Singapore.
 TO S.S. Despatches from the Governor of the Straits Settlements to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Microfilm. National Library Holdings, Singapore.
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