

History of Medicine

The History of Mental Health Services in South Africa

PART I. IN THE DAYS OF THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY

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SUMMARY

In the days of the Dutch East India Company mental illness was relatively common, owing to the harsh living conditions, poor food and excessive consumption of alcohol. Mental patients were detained in the general hospital, in the slave lodge, and on Robben Island. Examples of such cases, taken from the records, are described.

S. Afr. Med. J., 48, 1270 (1974).

Unless certain important facts are kept in mind, one may easily get a distorted picture of the actual state of affairs as regards mental illness during the early days at the Cape. These include the small population, the trying conditions under which the early settlers lived, and the prevailing knowledge and approach to mental disease.

It is often forgotten how small the numbers of the original White settlers at the Cape were. Van Riebeeck landed in 1652 with 100 men and 25 women and children. By 1661 they numbered 144, and 289 by 1679. In 1701 the White population was 1 334 and there were 891 slaves. In 1795 the population was only 14 927 Whites and 16 839 slaves.^{1,2}

The early settlers lived in ill-built shacks, often went short of food and were exposed to inclement weather conditions in winter. Ill-health was a serious problem. Of the 126 persons who made up the whole settlement in June 1652, 30 were ill with dysentery or fever. During May and June 13 deaths occurred from scurvy and dysentery. On 19 June only 15 out of 98 persons living ashore could work. The illnesses they suffered included oedema due to malnutrition and beri-beri. C. L. Leipoldt³ suggests that they also suffered from pellagra. This is very likely, and it still not infrequently causes a confusional state among patients in mental hospitals.

The mid-seventeenth century was a time when the general population drank heavily, and there are many references to excessive indulgence in alcohol among the early settlers. Van Riebeeck was constantly requesting the Company to replenish his stock of arrack, the favourite alcoholic drink of the period. In 1656 he requested the

Company to send an arrack distiller. Almost every ship arriving at the Cape had several 'leggers arracq' in its cargo.

Beer was considered to be part of the daily diet and its yeast content no doubt provided some much-needed vitamins. It was not long before the Company sent out some hop plants and numerous canteens soon arose in the vicinity of the fort of Goede Hoop. When viticulture was established the distillation of wine and brandy began. Drunkenness was a great problem to the authorities and in 1657 the Company's servants were forbidden credit of more than 2 pence farthing at any inn, nor were they allowed to buy drink after nine in the evening. Drunken brawling often resulted in stabbings, even murders, and the inn-keepers at the Cape had an evil reputation, as recorded by many travellers.⁴

The hard conditions of life no doubt contributed to the general atmosphere of the times, producing a mental climate very different from that of the present day. Religion of a severe Calvinistic type, combined with flourishing superstition, affected all aspects of life.

Justice was harsh and punishment severe. Torture was an everyday part of the judicial procedure, and sentences like whipping, branding, beheading and breaking on the wheel were common events, often carried out in public. Other instances of what we now consider barbarity were frequent. Thus a female slave who strangled her half-cast infant was tied up in a sack and thrown into the icy waters of Table Bay.² On 18 December 1671 'a certain Hottentot girl, about 24 years old who had since her early childhood been respectably educated here by civilized burghers, carefully taught the Dutch language and trained in burgher manners, had, without our being able to discover any reason, hanged herself in a sheep-pen by means of her "cabay band".' An inquest was held and 'according to the resolution of the Council the body was towards evening dragged by a donkey to the gallows, and there as a loathing of such abominableness, placed with the head in a fork, and hanged between heaven and earth.

'January 10th 1672. Discovered this morning that the fork on which the female Hottentoo had been hanged had been taken down and fallen over. Careful inquiry failed to discover the author.

'January 11th. Towards evening in order to carry out the sentence, the above-mentioned female Hottentoo was again lifted on the fork.'^{5,6} At other times suicides were

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dragged to the scaffold and suspended by the legs, or else the bodies were placed in a porcupine hole.²

The outlook on homosexuality is illustrated by the following extracts from the Cape Archives:⁶

'July 12th 1674. The captain of the *Helena*, Cornelius Jansen Frooy, charged with the most abominable crime committed with some young sailors.

'July 17th 1674. The two boys of the *Helena* examined, and though not confessing to having complied with the skipper's designs, nevertheless acknowledged that he had endeavoured to induce them to do so. Several Commissioners from the Council proceeded on board to inform the delinquents of their death sentence. N.B. The sentence is that they be drowned in the bay.

'December 16, 1725. A soldier, a sailor, and a field-guard to be smothered for the crime of sodomy.

'February 15, 1725. Two men sentenced for sodomy. Sentenced to be taken on board and with weights attached to them to be drowned in the bay.'

People were, therefore, by our standards, insensitive to cruelties which would be considered abominable today. This approach was intensified by the fact that the small White population was completely outnumbered by the natives as well as by the large numbers of slaves who were regarded as inferior beings, on whom aggressive or sadistic instincts could be vented with little fear of reprisal.

It is thus to be expected that the public attitude to lunacy would also share this insensitive outlook, while medieval beliefs of demoniac possession as a cause of mental disease were still rife. It was only with the advent of the French Revolution, towards the end of the 18th century, that the modern concept of lunacy as a disease was initiated by the French physician Pinel.

The situation during the Dutch East India Company's rule was that the European population was so small that special facilities for the treatment of lunatics, in the nature of mental hospitals, were hardly to be expected. Nor did the general attitude then make it likely that anyone would bother over-much to provide such facilities.

On the other hand, hypovitaminosis, alcoholism, infection, exhaustion and venereal disease were all rife and tended to make mental disease more common. These facts also held good for the large sailor population which regularly called at the Cape to and from the East, and thus contributed their quota of mentally ill. As for lunacy laws—there were none.

The foregoing makes it clear that in studying the history of this period one cannot expect to find detailed descriptions of methods of handling lunatics, or of institutions in which they were confined. One only meets isolated, casual mention of cases of mental disease, and one has to infer a good deal, owing to lack of detail. A consideration of all available facts shows that in the days of the Dutch East India Company mental cases were confined in one of the following places at the Cape:

1. The ordinary hospital.
2. The slave lodge.
3. The convict station on Robben Island.

THE HOSPITALS

A hospital was one of the earliest necessities of the first settlers when they landed in 1652, both for themselves and for sick members of the crews of passing ships. The first hospital formed part of the fort of Goede Hoop erected by Van Riebeeck soon after he landed, and was opened in 1656. It was very roughly constructed of planks thatched with reeds, and was situated in the 'hornwork' of the fort with the blacksmith's shop on one side and the stable on the other.⁸ The beds were stuffed with grass, and the place naturally soon became infested with vermin. In winter it was buffeted by the fierce north-westerly gales, and in summer the odour of rotting sea-weed made life almost unbearable for the patients.

Van Riebeeck himself was a surgeon, though he is only recorded as having practised his art once, when the senior surgeon was absent and the assistant taken ill.⁸ And on that occasion he appears to have done it with ill grace, suggesting that he felt it below his dignity in his exalted rank as Commander.

Among the surgeons whose names are mentioned during the very early days of the settlement are Cornelis, accused of occult practices on one occasion, Pieter Van Meerhof, who married a Hottentot maid, Vetteman, who left the Company's service and became the first civil surgeon and private practitioner at the Cape, and Dr William Robertson from Dundee who performed the first legal postmortem examination on 14 December 1658.⁹

When the fort was replaced by the stone castle another hospital was erected during Simon Van der Stel's governorship on a site just below the Company's garden between the upper ends of the present Adderley and St George's Streets. It was begun in 1697 and opened on 24 October 1699.²

It was a large building which held 500 patients and could take 750 in an emergency. A plan of this hospital can be found in the book of the German traveller O. F. Mentzel.¹⁰ It was a large two-storied building of a cruciform shape and intended only for the soldiers and sailors of the Company. Six to 10 slaves attended the patients in relays both day and night.⁸

To this hospital was later added a ward for mental patients, as described in this extract from the Archives: 'It was moreover decided as a useful and orderly measure to build on to one of the wings as soon as possible a small enclosed apartment for locking up the mad who are now and then found in the hospital, and with whom at present we are embarrassed.

'April 12th 1711. Decided that the chief surgeon's house and an apartment for the mentally diseased be built.'

It was common occurrence for officers and crew of passing ships to go insane and be set ashore at the Cape. Thus H. Swellengrebel wrote to Governor Ryk van Tulbagh on 21 July 1742, informing him that the captain of his ship, Jacob Popta, had gone out of his mind in Simon's Bay. Another letter from the Governor to the Governor-General of the Indies states that a ship's captain, Adriaan van der Graaf, had become insane and had to be relieved of his command on 1 February 1734.

The third and last hospital to be built under the Company's regime was situated not far from the castle,

near the site of the present magistrate's court in Caledon Square. The foundation stone was laid by Governor Van Plettenberg on 2 November 1772. There were delays in the building operations, and it had barely been completed when Holland found itself at war with England during the American War of Independence. It was feared that the British might try to seize the Cape, so the allied French Pondicherry Regiment was sent to help defend the Cape against a possible attack. As no other quarters were available, a part of the newly-built hospital was turned into barracks for this regiment. It was henceforth indiscriminately known as the Barracks, Kaserne or Hospital.

THE SLAVE LODGE

Van Riebeeck only had a few household slaves during the first years of the settlement, though he would have liked many more, and he frequently asked the Company to send him some. The first large batch of slaves arrived at the Cape on board the *Amersfoort* on 28 March 1658. This ship had left Amsterdam on 14 October 1657 with a crew of 323, of whom 29 died on the voyage while another 30 lay ill with scurvy.⁹ While at sea the *Amersfoort* met a Portuguese slaver, and as Holland was at war with Portugal, took 250 of her best slaves and landed them at the Cape for the use of the Company.

In order to accommodate this large addition to the slave population, a lodge was built just below the Company's garden, on the site of the present Old Supreme Court building at the top of Adderley Street. The slave population continued to increase so rapidly that by 1670 the lodge had to be enlarged and rebuilt. By 1751 it had become so dilapidated and overcrowded that it was again rebuilt and extended to house 600 slaves.

In the lodge the sexes were separated, while the children also had a section of their own. There was, however, considerable promiscuity among the slaves, and visiting soldiers and sailors frequently found their way to the lodge at night for convivial entertainment. There was a director in charge of the lodge, as well as surgeons, overseers and teachers on the staff.

An attic in the building housed convicts, while mentally ill persons were at times given small rooms within the slave lodge. This is illustrated by a resolution of the Governor and Council on 11 December 1725: 'Martha Nantas' husband, the burgher Nicholas Mieker, is a dangerous lunatic. She begs the Council to take steps to confine him

and he is placed in a small room in the slave lodge. His wife and friends to pay for his keep and to provide him with food.'—signed by Jan de la Fontaine, Governor, and Ryk van Tulbagh, Secretary.

ROBBEN ISLAND

The use of this island as a convict settlement was begun by Van Riebeeck very soon after he came to the Cape. Slaves were sent there for punishment, Hottentots who had come in conflict with the authorities were exiled there, and occasionally Whites who had committed crimes were sent across to the island. The first overseer appointed by Van Riebeeck was Jan Wouters, but in 1658 he was found to be incompetent and was replaced by Ryk Overhagen, who drew the princely salary of 14 gulden (about 190 cents) per month.

There are a number of references to the detention of mental patients on Robben Island in the old Cape records. However, no attempt was made to conduct a lunatic asylum on the island until much later, during the British occupation.

An interesting extract from the Cape Archives bearing on the use of Robben Island as a place of detention for lunatics reads as follows: 'June 4th, 1718. A patient in the hospital was seized with an attack of madness during the night and in that state killed a sick man lying next to him. He wounded ten or eleven more before he was overpowered'. This had a sequel: 'June 19th, 1723. News from Robben Island that Willem Wilkens . . . had had another attack on the island, and wounded a person, but not fatally.'

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