



## HISTORY

### The history of a War Memorial Children's Hospital in Cape Town

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We celebrate the inception half a century ago of the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital. Two proposed living memorials to members of the then Union Defence Force (UDF), now the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), who were wounded or killed on active service during World War II originated among soldiers on active service in Italy during 1944 - 1945.

There is a general belief that the concept of the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, as well as the subsequent collection of funds for building a children's hospital in Cape Town, was proposed by members of the Regiment 'Westelike Provinsie' who were serving in the 6th South African Division at the time. It was felt that the South African Red Cross Society, rather than the authorities, should be entrusted to hold the funds collected. A significant amount was reportedly collected in this way, although no records are available (personal communications – K Elkin, M Matthew, C Schulz).

Another group of soldiers attending an educational course in Florence, Italy, conceived the idea of establishing a nationwide health foundation as a living memorial.

Both groups believed that the memorial should be of social import, particularly to the benefit of South Africans of colour. The courage and dedication of the UDF's coloured and black troops had been markedly evident during the Abyssinian, Western Desert and Italian campaigns, in which they had served as sappers, anti-aircraft artillerymen, transport troops, stretcher-bearers and in various other capacities. The courage of the stretcher-bearers in desperate actions such as that at Sidi Rezegh in the Western Desert had made a deep impression on their white compatriots.

It appears that at some stage those who favoured a children's hospital in Cape Town had to give way to the idea of founding a nationwide health service for all members of the community, beginning with the needs of people of colour.

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### Early planning

The planning of a children's hospital in 1945 as a living memorial to the World War II fallen by the Cape Region of the South African Red Cross Society (Cape Red Cross) and the Cape Provincial Administration (CPA) is documented. Their efforts had the support of the Medical Association of South Africa (MASA), civic associations and the public. Locally resident veterans of the Abyssinian, Middle East and Italian campaigns probably played individual roles in promoting and assisting with the project, and Messrs Mansergh and Lightfoot, two of the architects of the hospital, had both been prisoners of war.

A children's hospital as a living Red Cross war memorial was first suggested at the annual general meeting of the Cape Red Cross in May 1945 under the chairmanship of Sir Richard Goode. Their Regional Council approved it as a worthy memorial to the sacrifice, suffering and service of South African soldiers during World War II, and one with which the Cape Red Cross would be proud to have been directly associated. They launched an appeal for funds, with a target figure of £200 000 – starting with a £10 000 donation from its own funds.

A planning committee was appointed consisting of Messrs V U T Watson (convener), G Ackerman, A F Corbett and L B Goldschmidt and Professor M R Drennan. Their first task was to resolve whether a children's hospital in the Cape Peninsula was included in a large hospital programme the CPA had announced at an estimated cost of £8 million over 10 years. The Administrator, Major G B van Zyl (subsequently Governor General of the Union of South Africa), advised that any possibility of a children's hospital being built in the Peninsula for many years to come was precluded by the crying need for hospitals in many parts of the Cape Province where none existed. The Cape Red Cross project was accordingly welcomed by the Administration, which agreed to a £-for-£ subsidy.

The drive to raise £200 000 for the proposed hospital was opened by a broadcast appeal from the Cape Town radio studios by the next Administrator, Mr P A Myburgh. He stressed the need for hospital beds for children, citing 400 children's deaths due to diarrhoea and enteritis between July 1944 and June 1945 because of the lack of hospital facilities ('Child Hospital as Memorial. Cape Drive to Raise £200,000', *Cape Times* 20 March 1946).



Problems arose between the National War Memorial Health Scheme (NWMS) Interim Committee and the Cape Red Cross during the latter half of 1945. The Interim Committee opposed the existence of two organisations competing for funds to establish 'living memorials'. They wanted the Cape Red Cross to join them and abandon the idea of a War Memorial Children's Hospital.

The government of the day favoured a National War Memorial Health Foundation, and the Minister of Health, Colonel H Gluckman, arranged a meeting to discuss the situation. An unsigned aide-mémoire, probably written by Mr W U T Watson, recorded those attending; a Cape Red Cross deputation consisting of Messrs W U T Watson, G Ackerman and J H Tandy, Dr L B Goldschmidt and Professor M R Drennan, and the Minister's group which consisted of Drs P Alan and G W Gale, Mrs M Ballinger (MP), Dr Freedman (MP), Lt. Col. C H S Runge, Maj. Gen. F Theron, Messrs Roscoe and Knoetze, and three other unnamed persons.

Arguments were raised to convince the Cape Red Cross deputation to join the NWMS. Lt. Col. C H S Runge made the point that the NWMS would be larger than a children's hospital, would satisfy the needs of others and be both living and lasting. Gen. F Theron indicated that the Cape 6th Division Thanksgiving Fund had collected about £12 000. However, the Cape Red Cross deputation stood its ground and made it clear that it wanted a children's hospital in Cape Town. Col. H Gluckman said that he would communicate this decision to the new Administrator of the Cape, Mr J G Carinus, and inform the Cape Red Cross about the outcome. The Minister, in a letter of 7 February 1946, confirmed that he had had a meeting with the Administrator, who had informed him that the CPA Executive Committee had resolved on 19 November 1945 that the Cape Hospital Board (CHB) be granted £200 000 towards the cost of a children's hospital, provided that the South African Red Cross Society contributed a similar amount. The minister added that the CPA would not be willing to fund the whole amount for a children's hospital. He also noted that 'the evidence submitted to the National Health Services Commission by the representatives of the Medical Association of South Africa (Cape Western Branch) and other local interests convinced me of the urgency which exists here for a children's hospital. Nevertheless I am bound to express regret that your organisation should have decided to sponsor as a war memorial a scheme which is a normal responsibility of the local population of the Cape Peninsula apart from the war ... you will appreciate therefore that it would be impossible for me to support any projects which are likely to interfere with the national appeal. I suggest therefore that you consider whether funds for this much-needed hospital could not be obtained without identifying the project with the war memorial movement.'

Sir Richard Goode thanked the Minister, in a reply dated 9 February 1946 and placed the letter before the society's

Branch Council. The minutes of a meeting of the fund-raising committee which was held on 8 February 1946 states: 'After discussing the letter of the 7th February 1946, addressed by the Minister of Health to the Branch Chairman, it was unanimously decided to recommend that the appeal in regard to the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital should be proceeded with as originally approved by the Branch Council.'

The building of a children's hospital was not referred to at the inaugural meeting of the War Memorial Health Foundation in 1946 and is also not evident in *The Story of Your Hospital* by Mr V U T Watson, which must be regarded as highly significant of the wide division and complete break between the two groups.

Strong support for the fund-raising campaign was expressed in a leader of the *Cape Times*, entitled 'Hospital for children', on 20 March 1946. The medical profession stressed the acute shortage of accommodation for sick children in the existing hospitals in the Cape Peninsula. The lack of a hospital devoted solely to children was emphasised in a leader in the *SAMJ*. MASA pleaded for support of the efforts of the Cape Red Cross to raise funds for a children's hospital in Cape Town. (The subject was also referred to in a circular sent to members by Drs Karl Bremer (MP) and Louis Bosman (MP), requesting full support for the fund-raising campaign by the Cape Red Cross Society.) They stated *inter alia* that the medical profession and MASA had originally urged the need for a children's hospital in Cape Town in 1941.

Mr J G Carinus requested the Cape Red Cross to assume the primary responsibility for planning and building the hospital. When completed, the hospital would be handed over to the CPA. Mr J G Carinus became president and Mr G Ackerman chairman of the appeal committee. The response to the appeal for funds was satisfactory. By September 1947 the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles had raised £700 for beds, and the Red Cross Society had Christmas cards for sale at sixpence each towards the end of 1947.

The CHB under the chairmanship of Capt. N Hare from 1945 until 1951 was responsible for the provision and maintenance of hospitals in the Cape Province. In a review of the work of the CHB it is stated that the Cape Red Cross had a project to build a children's hospital as a war memorial, supported by the military forces who had returned from the North at the close of World War II.

## Finding a site

The hospitals sub-committee of the CHB, including Cape Red Cross representation, chaired by Mr A A Balsillie (MPC), commenced its quest for a suitable site. Advantages of establishing the children's hospital as near as possible to Groote Schuur Hospital were stressed, but this proved unsuccessful. Sites subsequently documented included a site in Pinelands near Conradie Hospital, Maynardville,



Hawthorndene (the property of Princess Labia), the government vaccine station in Rosebank, and the municipal recreational grounds in Rondebosch. The last two sites were favoured. The central government and the Cape Town City Council were approached to obtain a site without cost.

Information was received that the authorities were considering moving part of the vaccine station at Rosebank and a portion of this ground, which was satisfactory as regards accessibility for a children's hospital, would be available. Progress during 1948 - 1949 concerning this site and planning the 400-bed hospital was disappointing as a serious obstacle was encountered. Test boreholes sunk on the site for the guidance of the constructional engineers disclosed porous clay to a considerable depth, which would necessitate additional expenditure of approximately £100 000 for piers for the foundations. The final blow fell in December 1949 when, because of delays in decisions of a technical nature, the Rosebank site could not be expected to be vacated for at least a further 2 years. Efforts were renewed to find an alternative site.

A deputation met the Mayor of Cape Town, Councillor C O Booth, to ask for help in solving the problem. They indicated that the municipal ground bordering the Rondebosch Common and Klipfontein Road, which had been leased by the municipality to the Municipal Employees' Sports Association for some years but had not been used, would be a satisfactory site in exchange for the vaccine station site. Subsequent negotiations proved successful, and the central government's approval was obtained.

## Architectural progress and financial setbacks

The initial planning required that the hospital should provide for future expansion to a capacity of at least 600 beds. A non-resident patients' department was to be built. The intention was that outpatients should attend only by appointment and after being referred for specialist attention. A lecture hall and other teaching facilities were planned to meet the requirements of medical students and postgraduate students. Architects in consultation with the Children's Hospital Committee of the Cape Red Cross, a special technical sub-committee of the CHB, and the Cape Western Branch of MASA planned a hospital according to the most modern standards. Medical, nursing and technical experts were involved. The architects were assisted by Dr Wolf Rabkin, Head of the Department of Paediatrics at Groote Schuur Hospital and the University of Cape Town, and advised by Professor Moncrieff of the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital in London. A preliminary sketch of the south front of the proposed hospital appeared in *The Argus* of 20 April 1948.

The approximate cost was now well over £1 million and Mr J G Carinus halted the expansive planning as it was impossible

to proceed with the money available. Dr J Ware, the Medical Inspector of Hospitals of the CPA Hospitals Department, was asked to draw up a balanced plan of realistic cost, to the same standard but with reduced accommodation and provision for reasonable expansion. His 'outline' scheme was considered by all concerned at the meetings under the chairmanship of Dr J Hendrikz, the Director of Hospital Services. Actively involved in the discussions were Mr A A Bassilie, Dr A I Goldberg, Dr L N Mirvish, Mr V U T Watson, Dr J Ware, Dr J Luckoff, Mr A F Corbett, and Dr L B Goldschmidt. The MASA sub-committee dealing with the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, Drs J van Selm and Wolf Rabkin, expressed concern about many aspects of the planning and the inadequate outpatient department facilities. However, the scheme was eventually accepted with minor amendments. Although the CPA could now commence, they stated that, because of the large volume of building work on their hands and staff limitations, it would be impossible for the building to be undertaken for at least 2 years.

The situation was depressing, and a deputation discussed the problem with Mr Carinus. He enquired whether the Cape Red Cross would be prepared to assume the responsibility for building the hospital, and on completion hand it over to the CPA. With trepidation the Council of the Cape Red Cross accepted the Administration's offer. At this stage it was estimated that the hospital, when completed and fully equipped, would cost £700 000, considerably in excess of the £400 000 target adopted by the Cape Red Cross and the CPA. However, by the end of March 1951, the Cape Red Cross had received £190 878 and by March 1952, £219 583. The CPA agreed to increase its contribution and to be responsible for a further £100 000 to equip the hospital, while the Cape Red Cross undertook further financial responsibility. Fund-raising by the Cape Red Cross closed on 13 December 1954, when the sum collected reached £238 000 and donors were informed that the target had been reached. Contributions had come in pennies from the poor, thousands of pounds given by wealthy persons or companies, and in large and small amounts raised at street collections, fêtes and balls in town and country. Detailed information on the organisation of the appeal under Mr G Ackerman, Chairman of the Appeal Committee, is in the Archives of the Cape Red Cross.

## Building and completion

A special Red Cross Children's Hospital Building Committee chaired by Mr Watson was appointed to proceed with the project. The architects, Mr Brian Mansergh, in association with Messrs Lightfoot, Twentyman-Jones and Kent, commissioned by the CPA and the Cape Red Cross, were briefed that the hospital was to accommodate 176 children and 10 mothers, and have a treatment block for outpatients, with the potential to expand to nearly double this capacity. A nurses' block and



a lecture hall and other teaching facilities were to be included to meet the requirements of nurses, and both under- and postgraduate medical students.

Continually rising costs made it imperative to commence building operations as soon as possible in 1952. A start was made on the nurses' quarters, which were completed in 1953, since the planning for the main hospital was more complex. The Governor General, Dr E G Jansen laid the foundation stone on 7 October 1953, and reports and photographs of the ceremony appeared in the *Cape Times* on 8 October 1953. Uniformed Red Cross members of all races lined the route to the dais where the ceremony took place. The hospital was handed over to Mr P J Olivier, the Administrator of the Cape, on 29 February 1956. The cost of the fully equipped hospital at completion was £700 000, of which the Red Cross had contributed £238 000. The *Cape Argus* of 28 February 1956 gave the completed hospital extensive coverage, the headline reading '£700 000 hospital is a community effort' and a report of the ceremony appeared in the *SAMJ* of 31 March 1956.

Mr V U T Watson presented the Administrator with a document formally handing over the hospital to the CPA and containing a description of its purpose and evolution. The Deed of Handing Over the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital in English and Afrikaans by The South African Red Cross Society (Cape Region) contains information that should be honoured in perpetuity: 'In handing over The Red Cross War Memorial Hospital to the Provincial Administration of the Cape of Good Hope, to be run as a hospital for specialised treatment of children, Red Cross desires to record that the Hospital has been established by the Cape Region of Red Cross of South Africa as an enduring memorial of the sacrifice, suffering and service of our people in World War II, 1939 - 1945.' The following statement also appears in bold in the deed: 'Red Cross earnestly requests that this record shall be suitably preserved in the Hospital, so that future generations, in their thankfulness for the relief of the suffering of their young ones, may be mindful of those in whose memory this Hospital has been established.'

The Administrator, in officially taking over the hospital from the Cape Red Cross on behalf of the CPA, spoke on the theme 'on the ruins of the past do we build the future'.

The hospital was opened at 8.45 am on Monday, 18 June 1956 at a dedication service attended by the staff and led by the Rev. C K Storey of the Methodist Church and the Rev. A J van Wyk of the Dutch Reformed Church. The *Cape Times* of Friday, 15 June 1956 reported that the first patients admitted on 15 June 1956 were 15 convalescent children with poliomyelitis and from 18 June medical cases would be admitted. Surgical cases

would have to wait till 16 July, when the four surgical theatres, the outpatients department and the casualty department would be opened.

## Conclusion

Has the hospital remained as a worthy memorial to the sacrifice, suffering and service of South African soldiers during World War II? Has it benefited children of South Africans of colour and has the lot of all children suffering from illness been alleviated? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes'. By January 1957 outpatient attendances were 3 000 a month and by 1961 88 836. Of these, 90% were persons of colour; over 90% did not pay hospital fees and over 70% attended the medical department. The last figure increased to over 80% by 1970. The doors of the outpatient department remained open 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Approximately 80% of the beds were allocated to patients of colour. The percentage of medical and surgical in-patients remained at approximately 50% each.

The Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, in the 61st year since it was conceived by the Red Cross Society of South Africa (Cape Region), and 50 years after the admission of its first patients, has remained a vibrant and living memorial to members of the South African forces who were wounded or killed during World War II.

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