

# THE EARLY HISTORY OF KING EDWARD VIII HOSPITAL, DURBAN

R. E. STEVENSON

'The first time I beheld this hospital, it was as a monument near the Durban Bay, and I knew that the patients would not want for fresh air.'

Thus wrote nurse Virginia Yeni in the King Edward



Miss V. L. Borgen, the present Matron of King Edward VIII Hospital.

VIII Hospital magazine in 1936. Her impression picturesquely described the magnificence, by the standards of those days, of the structure and site of the new hospital at Congella.

At Addington Hospital, the old 'temporary' non-European wards had become so unsavoury after their many years of crowded existence, that by about 1934 it became obvious that conditions were too deplorable to be allowed to persist. After the protracted negotiations, inseparable from dealings between Province and City, a site at Congella was selected and an entirely new non-European hospital was planned.

Architects practising in Natal were invited to submit designs, and the firm of Messrs. Cowen, Powers and Ellis were awarded the first premium and appointed to develop the scheme.

Originally the hospital consisted of a series of single-storey units with a 2-storey administrative section and reinforced concrete-framed, multi-storey ward blocks. The buildings were faced externally with red facing bricks under corrugated asbestos roofing. Verandahs were designed on the west elevation of all wards, but these were of necessity used as bed space from the beginning. The first medical superintendent (Dr. R. E. Stevenson) was appointed before the contract was completed. He was therefore in a position to collaborate with the architects in the final stages.

The buildings were ready in mid-1936. The total cost of construction was R265,000 or less than R380 per bed — an astonishingly low figure, all the more remarkable in



Miss F. M. Fitz-Gerald, the first Matron of King Edward VIII Hospital.

that the buildings and fittings were, by non-European standards then current, extravagant and lavish.

For several months it was a common occurrence to see patients with ivory buttons labelled 'Push', 'Pull', 'Hot' or 'Cold' in the lobes of their ears.

The design was simple and the type of construction suitable. However, since everyone who works in or near a hospital is a heaven-sent authority on hospital design, there were as many criticisms as there were doctors and nurses. However, these criticisms cancelled each other out and there was, in the final analysis, little to cavil at even in the light of the incredible, rapid extension of the work and the gross overcrowding that so quickly supervened.

#### *Medical and Nursing Staff*

The assistant visiting medical staff came over from Addington almost to a man, and even before the days of compulsory internship there were nearly always plenty of resident medical officers.

As far as nurses were concerned, Addington was unable to offer much help, but an adequate number of European sisters (there were virtually no trained non-Europeans in those days) came from other Natal hospitals, and about 30 more were imported from Britain. Nearly all these nurses were young and newly qualified. They introduced a refreshing originality of thought and attitude to their patients and their work — which became traditional in the hospital.

Sixteen men came from the Special Service Battalion to be trained as male nurses. Young, intelligent, and keen, nearly all passed their examinations with distinction, and they have had very successful careers.

Early in 1936, 40 hand-picked Bantu girls were taken on as probationers. They were sent to the Inanda Seminary where, under the guidance of Miss F. M. Fitz-Gerald, the

newly appointed matron, and the Seminary staff, they received preliminary training in nursing and brushed up their English and other school subjects.

At the end of 6 months, having been replaced by a second batch, they started work at the hospital.

The progress of these original nurses was interesting and can be followed to a large extent by their naïve contributions to their hospital magazine.

King Edward VIII Hospital was the first Government Hospital to train nurses for the Council Certificate in South Africa.

Trained by a matron who spoke their language fluently, and by South African sisters who were keen and understanding, the girls developed a sense of responsibility and a contented outlook. Their concerts, religious society, library, tennis, and magazine kept them healthily occupied, and they emerged efficient nurses and self-respecting members of society.

A few quotations from their magazine reveal a surprising perception and humanity often quaintly expressed:

'I would like to be a nurse who can make people smile though their bodies are ill and worn out.'

After a busy Saturday night in the casualty department: 'I would rather be a nurse than remain at home to be stabbed like a cow.'

'...the tennis court had been disagreeing with our tennis players — now the linings are clearly white as far as the eye can see.'



Dr. R. E. Stevenson, the first Medical Superintendent of King Edward VIII Hospital.

After the wedding of one of the house surgeons, to which the nurses were invited—'there was a little silence when the bride was to enter; as she entered she was handed by the medical superintendent who presented her at the hands of the bridegroom.'

Concluding verse of a paean of praise:

'Don't you love the new building for Basha's  
The beautiful walls of Jericho  
The building that will never fall till doomsday  
The building that shall be visited by the Umbilo monkeys  
The building that hides the main-line train.'

#### Official Opening

After a preliminary period of 3 nerve-shattering months, the hospital was officially opened. The function took place on 3 December 1936.

It was half past ten in the morning when, to use the words of probationer nurse Chrissie Masongo, 'people flocked to the hospital to take their seats . . . At eleven, the Governor General and Lady Clarendon arrived accompanied by some men in authority. The crowd raised up from their seats with eager eyes . . . the Earl of Clarendon gave a long speech which was again and again applauded by the audience . . .'. The 'men in authority' were Mr. F. C. Hollander, M.E.C., Chairman of the Hospital Advisory Board, and the Honourable H. Gordon Watson, Administrator of Natal. The hospital was officially named after King Edward VIII.

#### Expansion

From the start the hospital boomed. It was designed for 720 patients. The figures given below show how much and how fast it expanded:

|                                 | 1937   | 1940   | 1944    | 1950    | 1960    |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| Average number of occupied beds | 500    | 820    | 1,100   | 1,636   | 1,739   |
| Patients admitted               | 13,350 | 27,125 | 36,345  | 45,447  | 70,572  |
| Outpatients                     | 29,100 | 69,000 | 302,315 | 415,293 | 558,146 |
| Births                          | 300    | 2,000  | 3,520   | 6,347   | 13,908  |

The increase in the number of births is significant. At one stage, the medical superintendent reported that 10 tons of babies had been born in a year; to this he might have added that, if laid end to end, they would have reached from the post office steps to the West Street pier.

Such fantastic expansion without commensurate increase in accommodation or funds, added to a great shortage of European nurses (there were at one time 40 vacancies in an establishment of 70), and imposed an almost intolerable strain on all sections of the staff.

The war years were particularly difficult, but did at least ensure that 'temporary' weatherboard wards (still in use) were provided by the military authorities.

On one occasion, 100 West African soldiers off a troop ship had to be accommodated in an already overcrowded hospital at less than 12 hours' notice. Such problems have been commonplace in the history of the hospital.

In 1948, the adjacent City Fever Hospital was taken over. Ancillary outpatient clinics have been established at Beatrice Street (the building—a gift of the Indian-African



King Edward VIII Hospital (Kwa Khangela), Durban.

Line), Cato Manor, and Clermont. Ward relief was also effected by the taking over by the Natal Provincial Administration of the Point Hospital from the Indian Immigration Bureau in 1949, and Clairwood Hospital from the Union Government in 1956.

The cost of all these services and of the Medical School is a source of horror to the Natal taxpayer who remembers that the ratio of non-Europeans to Europeans in Natal is enormously higher than in any other Province.

On the other hand, the opening of a new hospital which was completely independent of any European institution, which had a young and enthusiastic Visiting Staff and, though overcrowded, was provided with decent equipment and fittings, resulted in vastly improved standards of service to the non-European patients and of the practice of medicine in Durban.

In 1939 I drew attention to the immensity of the work which was undertaken and to the certainty that the work would rapidly and progressively increase: '... an enormous amount of our work arises from preventable causes — hospital and public-health work are most intimately connected; the health of the non-European is deplorable and this is mainly because of poverty and the inadequacy of public-health measures; nearly all Native patients are grossly undernourished and infested with intestinal parasites; the incidence of tuberculosis and venereal disease is fantastic'.

These conclusions, though shocking, were by no means overstatements. They now apply to a considerably less extent because of the improvements in feeding and housing which are slowly but surely becoming apparent. Today the hospital is a proud and indispensable institution which deals with 600,000 outpatients and 70,000 inpatients yearly.