

THE NEW SOMERSET HOSPITAL AND ITS PREDECESSORS

G. J. JOUBERT, *Medical Superintendent, Somerset Hospital, Cape Town*

The first hospital in the Cape was founded by Jan van Riebeeck in 1656. This hospital was, however, infested with vermin, and the patients had no beds to lie on. The



Dr. G. J. Joubert

nursing duties were carried out by slaves who nursed the patients on their straw beds. These slaves can therefore be considered as South Africa's first nurses.

Twenty years later a second hospital was built. This structure was more impressive and even had a tiled roof.

A third hospital was completed by Governor Simon van der Stel in 1699. This building accommodated no less than 1,000 patients — a

large number even by modern standards. The patients were all employees of the Dutch East India Company. This hospital was in use for about 70 years.

A fourth hospital was built in Caledon Square by Governor van Plettenberg, and was used largely for the treatment of sailors and soldiers. It was the first time in the history of the Cape that patients other than employees of the Dutch East India Company were allowed in hospital. They were, however, treated by the hospital medical staff and not by their private medical attendants.

During all this time slaves were usually employed as nurses, both as general and maternity nurses.

The Old Somerset Hospital was erected in 1818, from funds provided by a naval surgeon, Dr. Samuel S. Bailey. He provided the funds not only for the building of the hospital but also for its maintenance for a number of years. This building had accommodation for mentally disordered patients as well — it thus became South Africa's first mental hospital. Subsequently, the disordered patients, the lepers and the convicts were transferred to Robben Island. The leper settlement was only moved to another part of the country in the 1930's.

THE NEW SOMERSET HOSPITAL

The following is a quotation from the Civil Service List, 1887:

'This hospital was built by the Imperial Government, the foundation-stone being laid on the 18th August 1859, by His Excellency Sir George Grey, and was opened in 1862 for the purposes of a general hospital, the old building being reserved for the reception of pauper incurables. It is supported from the general revenue of the Colony, and belongs to the Department of the Colonial Secretary. The professional staff consists of a consulting physician, a consulting surgeon, a resident surgeon (who is also Superintendent, and responsible to the Colonial Secretary for the management of the institu-

tion), and an assistant resident surgeon. Patients are eligible for admission who are unable to pay for medical or surgical aid at their own homes; who are officers of ships or sailors; who are strangers in the town or Colony, having no fixed abode therein; and those who are the subjects of serious injury or accident. All patients who are in a condition to do so are required to pay hospital fees according to their circumstances. Applications for admission must be made to the resident surgeon at the hospital.'

The ceremony of the laying of the foundation-stone was accompanied by great pomp and splendour. Flags of many nations were hoisted and all the important personages of the city attended. Bands played, and the day was proclaimed a public holiday. This was the largest number of people to have assembled in the old Cape Colony up to that time — the crowd having been estimated at about 10,000.

The new hospital was opened in August 1862 as a general hospital. Early in August 1862 Dr. Bickersteth, the man who fought for and was mainly responsible for the coming into being of the New Somerset Hospital, died. He would undoubtedly have been the first Medical Superintendent.

The hospital was built in the Tudor style with the general shape of an inverted 'T'. The towers have been left undisturbed and they serve a useful purpose being principally used for sluice-rooms, bathrooms, etc.

After completion in 1861 the hospital was left unfurnished and unoccupied until August 1862. During this period critics of the Government had a grand time and waxed eloquent about the delays and the general appearance of the building, some describing it as 'an abortion of a building', and others as 'a haunted castle' on its way to ruin and decay.

The building cost £25,000. This amount appeared to the critics of the day to be quite exorbitant. They had no doubt that the public's money had been wastefully spent and squandered. This 'pet' of the Government, as it was

described, had one bad fault — the roof leaked badly in certain sections. This annoying feature persisted until quite recent years when the Provincial Administration had the matter remedied.

The first Medical Superintendent of the hospital was Dr. John Laing. Also on the staff were Dr. H. A. Ebdon, a senior surgeon, a dispenser, female attendants, male attendants, a cook, a laundress, a porter, and attendants on patients.



Dr. John Laing, the first Medical Superintendent of the New Somerset Hospital

The total expenditure for the year 1885 for the upkeep of the hospital was £8,256 16s. 5d. There were 1,686 inpatients, 8,595 outpatients, and the daily inpatient average was 129.

In 1897 an extra wing was added to the hospital, called the Jubilee Wing, in honour of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

The hospital was first under the control of the Colonial Secretary, and from 1889 onwards under the control of a Board of Governors whose first Chairman was Mr. F. Y. St. Leger. The Cape Hospital Board took control from 1913 to 1949. During this time there were eleven hospitals in the Peninsula. Since 1939, when the hospital became solely a non-European institution, Dr. L. Blumberg has been the Chairman of the Hospital Board.

The nurses used to be housed in the hospital. On the completion of the first nurses' home, more wards became available for the patients. So many new buildings have been added that there is very little room for gardens or recreational facilities.

Since 1914 the following new buildings have been erected: a nurses' home, two bungalow-type nurses' homes and quarters for 6 non-European doctors. In 1956 a start was made on another modern home.

In 1916, thanks to a liberal bequest by Mr. J. Shipley, and contributions from Mr. and Mrs. Brown Lawrence, an ophthalmic and aural disease department was opened; this department was simply called 'Shipley'. In the 1920's it became obvious that the New Somerset Hospital could no longer play the role of a leading hospital in a rapidly expanding city. Plans were accordingly made for a much larger and more modern hospital to be built on the slopes of Table Mountain. The foundation-stone of the new hospital was laid in 1932, and Groote Schuur Hospital came into being 6 years later, so that once again the New took over from the Old, and all patients were moved to the new hospital. Once more the Somerset Hospital stood idle for a time, but it was re-opened in 1939 — this time as a purely non-European hospital, i.e. all the patients and all the nurses and staff nurses were non-Europeans. This opened a new vista for the Coloured community of the Cape and even further afield. For the first time young non-European women were given the opportunity to train as nurses. They have certainly taken full advantage of this, and nurses have been trained there who can compare



Mr. F. Y. St. Leger, the first Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Somerset Hospital

favourably with those from any other part of the country.

The ophthalmic and aural unit now became the obstetric unit. It is an extremely busy department. At the moment the average number of births in the department is about 220 per month. The matron in charge of this section of the hospital is a member

of the Coloured community. The whole trend of the policy regarding the provision of staff has been to employ as many non-Europeans as possible.

In 1954 great improvements were brought about by the building of 3 new operating theatres in the general hospital, by the modernization of the theatre in the maternity hospital, and by the building of a modern and larger outpatient department and new pharmacy. The hospital had a large laundry and orthopaedic workshop attached to it until a few years ago. The laundry served all the hospitals in the Peninsula, while the orthopaedic workshop was the largest and most important unit of its kind in the Cape. Today these departments are housed in very up-to-date and modern buildings in the city. The old laundry was converted into lecture theatres and a recreation hall for the nurses. This building and its amenities compare very favourably with any other serving a similar purpose in the country.

Today the New Somerset Hospital is a training centre for medical interns, nurses and medical students. Doctors specializing in midwifery, gynaecology and medicine can do so at the Somerset Hospital. Soon we hope that doctors who wish to specialize in surgery and anaesthetics will also be able to do so at this institution. It may be of interest that the first Cape Coloured doctor who obtained higher qualifications in gynaecology and obstetrics in the Cape did so from the New Somerset Hospital. He passed his examinations with honours at the first attempt.