

History of Nursing in Malta¹ [6] Care of the Aged and Infirm

Care of the Aged and Infirm

The first government home for male and female elderly and the infirm was established in 1729 when parts of the *polverista* of the Order of St. John in Floriana were transformed into a *poor house*. Grand Master Fra Antonio Manoel De Vilhena set up this *Charity Home* on the 16th December 1732 in the vicinity of the other building.

The workers consisted of a surgeon, a captain, a chaplain a clerk and a guardian. In 1854 the government began to contemplate the building of an adequate place in which to turn the *Charity Home*. Ms. Florence Nightingale and Dr. J. Sutherland were consulted regarding the plans of the building. In a letter dated 23rd May 1862, addressed to the Hon. F. V. Inglott, Florence Nightingale wrote that: *The plans are so good (much better than any male or female hospital I have ever seen) that the difficulty lies in finding fault with it.* The conditions in the Ospizio in 1885 were very bad. When His Excellency the Governor, Sir. J. A. Lintorn Simmons visited the institution, during this year, he found the place *dirty and filthy* and said *it is scandalous in the time at which we are living.* In fact the new *Poor House* was finished in 1892 and it was named St. Vincent de Paul Hospital in 1940.

In St. John the Baptist Hospital and St. Julian's in Gozo there were also some poor invalids. In 1849 the foundation stone was placed as the beginning of a building near that of St. John and in 1851 a new Ospizio of 172 beds was built in Gozo. The first private institution exclusively built for the care of the elderly and the infirm was set up on the initiative of the Maltese doctor, Dr. Nicolo' Saura. For this reason, the St. Nikola Hospital was built in Rabat, Malta. It was better known as the Saura Hospital led by the Sisters of Charity.

Nicola Dingli of Siggiewi and his wife Maddalena Cornelio of Senglea set up a small hospital under the name of St. Anne's Hospital in 1794, which was administered by the nuns of the Third Order of St. Francis. In 1898 there was a male *nurse* working in this hospital, whose work consisted of laundering the clothes. When the Society of the Little Sisters of the Poor came to Malta in 1878, they opened a home for the elderly in Pietà and went to Hamrun in 1880.

Other Specialised Hospitals

Leprosy

It is said that Leprosy was existent in Malts during the Arab Rule (870-1090 AD) and the Sancto Spirito at Rabat was a *Leprosarium*. In part of the Sacra Infermeria known as the *falanga* there were patients suffering from contagious diseases. At Imgieret, near the Poor House there was also a *Leprosarium* in 1899. On the 24th May 1900 forty-five lepers overcame their attendants and fled from the hospital. In 1937 a *Leprosarium* was opened at Fort Chambrai Gozo.

Tuberculosis

At the end of the nineteenth century, an old palace in Mdina was furnished as a tuberculosis hospital. In the beginning this building was used temporarily as a hospital during the cholera epidemic of 1837 and in 1857 it was changed into a military hospital for the treatment of eye conditions. In 1860 it was once more to change the purpose of its existence as it was turned into a convalescence home for the British troops. In 1909 this hospital was named *Connaught Hospital* and it was closed in 1956. In 1933, Gozitan patients suffering from Tuberculosis were treated at St. Theresa Hospital (Ta' l-Ibraġ near Rabat).

Venereal Diseases

During the 17th century, a small building near the *Women's Hospital* was used for the care of female patients with venereal disease. Afterwards, at the Sacra Infermeria, a special room was kept for this purpose. A special attendant was employed to take care of patients who were undergoing treatment with mercury. In 1861 Lock Hospital was established for venereal diseases in the Central Hospital. Patients in this hospital

¹ Joseph Camilleri, *L-Istorja tan-Nursing f'Malta*, translated into English and edited by Catherine Sharples. The work is mostly based on Paul Cassar's *Medical History of Malta*. Wellcome Hist Med Libr, London, 1964. The work related to 20th Century Regulation, Mental Health Education, Institute of Health Care and Single-Level Nursing is material that has been added by Jesmond Sharples.

were transferred to the Poor House at Imgieret during 1910. A special clinic for Venereal Disease was set up at the Central Hospital in March of 1926.

The Plague and Lazzaretto

In 1675 the first cases of plague broke out and this spread quickly throughout the whole of the island. There were 11,300 deaths in nine months, out of a population of 70,000. Amongst the dead there were 16 surgeons, 10 doctors and over 1,000 hospital attendants. In 1728 at Lazzarett Hospital, which was situated at Marsamxett Harbour, nurses were of a very unrefined kind and used to learn how to take care of patients by experience. In 1813 when Lazzarett had been built close to Fort Manoel on Manoel Islands, there was so much overcrowding of patients that some of them were transferred to the same Fort and also to the smaller islands of Selmun at St. Paul's Bay where temporary camps had been purposely erected.

At Lazzarett *toxaemia* and delirium was very frequent and when one considers the low standards of nursing at the time, serious incidents and complications could not be totally prevented. The most grievous problem was the lack of trained employees. The ignorance on infectious epidemiology led to a lack of effective protection for the staff. As a result the staff was exposed to great danger and most of them became infected. It was very difficult to find new employees because of illness and death. In these circumstances, hospital conditions were deplorable. An English doctor, who visited Lazzarett at the worst of the epidemic, observed twenty-eight cases being treated by two individuals (*ikkalzrati*) as nurses.

To encourage the employment of more individuals into the service at Lazzarett, the Health Board reissued a set of regulations for better conditions for the service and an increase in wages. However, the response was too small, and the Authority had to accept the service of incompetent employees, some of whom had a disreputable character. Later even these workers failed and the government had to enforce into service, at Lazzarett, people who were lacking in morale and even foreigners - Jews, Greek and Turks - later troops and guardians had to be employed. It is hardly surprising therefore that these employees of such disrepute abused of the system and so discipline had to be harsh. Punishment including the death penalty had to be given. In fact there is a plaque on one of the walls at Lazzarett that says that a special gallows had been erected on the 26th March 1814 for the execution of Felice Camilleri; one of the guardians at Lazzarett, who had been condemned to death for breaking the quarantine rules. He was given her Majesty's Governor's pardon – for being the first person to be thus condemned since the beginning of colonial rule in Malta.

At the beginning of the 20th century, midwives attending to women suffering of puerperal infections were not allowed to attend to other patients before they had been through personal decontamination at Lazzarett, during which their bag and instruments were also sterilised.

In 1910 an English vessel arrived from India carrying a crewmember suffering from the plague. In fact the patient was treated at the old barracks of Comino. The Knights of St. John had built these barracks and a doctor and nurse who stayed on Comino until the patient was well enough to be discharged, patiently cared for the crewmember.

The Children's Hospital

The first hospital for poor children, in which treatment was given for free, was opened on the 1st August 1922. The Children's ward in St. Luke's Hospital was opened in February 1948, for medical cases.