

The Lady Ridgeway Hospital For Children A History Beyond Medicine

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The Lady Havelock Hospital c. 1910 (Photograph: Skeen & Co)

During the period 1890-1895 when Sir Arthur Havelock was Governor of Ceylon, one of his greatest achievements was making available many advances and new awareness in medical science to the Island's inhabitants. Until the late 19th Century, children were treated as miniature adults before paediatrics emerged as a speciality. So one chief medical institution for which this Governor was officially responsible, although his wife provided the impetus, was a children's hospital.

Words: Richard Boyle

The remarkable but unpublished account of this hospital has now been revealed by Professor Manouri P Senanayake in Paediatrics and Child Care in Sri Lanka: The Past Unfolded. Professor Senanayake states that this history began when George Wall, a tea planter and philanthropist, discussed with Lady Havelock the innovative idea of creating a separate hospital for women and children. Enthused, Lady Havelock headed a committee to

raise funds from the public, which amounted to 46,000 rupees. Consequently, on January 17, 1895, the Governor laid the foundation stone of what was to be called the Lady Havelock Hospital for Women and Children (LHH).

It took over a year to build, by which time Sir Arthur Havelock had been succeeded as Governor by Sir Joseph West Ridgeway, and so it was Lady Ridgeway who ceremonially opened the hospital on October 12, 1896. A grand occasion supported by several local companies was planned, but, as the Sinhala daily newspaper Lakrivikirana reported: "rain somewhat dampened the grandeur of the occasion and some of the planned pageantry could not take place, nevertheless a large gathering of distinguished persons graced the occasion."

"At exactly 4.30pm the Honourable Sir and Lady Ridgeway accompanied by their daughter arrived. A volunteer band struck up as they alighted from their vehicle and they were welcomed by Dr Kynsey [Principal Civil Medical Officer]. Lady Ridgeway was presented with a memento of the occasion, a silver casket in which lay a silver key."

There followed a blessing by the Archdeacon of Colombo and an address by Dr Kynsey in which he explained how the hospital had come into existence mainly due to George Wall, who, alas, died before its completion. Lady Ridgeway conveyed how sad Lady Havelock was for being unable to attend and declared open the free-of-charge hospital, which was bedecked with ferns and flowers for the occasion.

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Situated in spacious environs in the Colombo suburb of Borella, the hospital's architecture was of typical British colonial-style with red terracotta walls, ornate windows, and imposing colonnades, the columns interspersed with shade-giving tats that ensured a cool, surrounding corridor and interior.

The hospital was furnished and decorated by commercial sponsors, and the first matron was quoted as saying she had "never seen such a neatly fitted hospital". There were four wards, each with six beds and two cots (the latter with red coverlets embroidered with the letters "LHH"), and six separate rooms for paying patients - 32 beds in total. The wards were named after donors who had contributed over 4,000 rupees, the separate rooms after donors who contributed over 1,000 rupees, and even some beds after donors who contributed over 500 rupees. It was truly a hospital by the people for the people.

Soon after the opening, Ceylon's first nursing school was established at the hospital, of significance as this was just 18 years after Florence Nightingale had opened her school in London. It was run by a British matron, who Professor Senanayake believes may well have been trained by Nightingale as she was reported to have "a keen interest in the sanitary and health measures adopted in India and the colonies".

Mention of "The Lady with the Lamp" makes it important to remember that Sri Lanka possesses a remarkable indigenous medicinal heritage: a herbal practice of medicine called Hela-Veda, hospitals before Rome, Egypt or China, kings who were dedicated physicians, and women who nursed wounded soldiers seven centuries before Nightingale. But then, as in all civilizations, there was a decline...

In a later, westernised era of medicine, the impressive LHH soon became crowded and understaffed, and problems arose because the children were not accommodated separately. So on February 26, 1909, the then Governor, Sir Henry McCullum, laid the foundation stone for the construction of a separate block for children funded once again by public subscription, on this occasion under the patronage of Lady Ridgeway. Opened on September 27, 1910, this new section was called the Lady Ridgeway Hospital (LRH), a two-storey building "with a majestic interior of decorative flooring, an ornate balustrade and a sweeping wooden staircase".

Thus one hospital became two, creating the country's first independent children's hospital. However, it wasn't until 1937 that a paediatrician was appointed, a major turning point for child care. After Independence in 1948 the Ministry of Health adopted plans to progressively reconstruct the LRH. The first wing of the new hospital containing new wards was opened in 1950 (the year the LRH acquired its first X-ray machine), the Outpatient Department (OPD) in 1957, the rest of the wards in 1961, and a new operating theatre in 1971.

As for the Lady Havelock Hospital, it ceased to exist in 1954 when the nearby Castle Street Hospital for women opened. The remaining buildings were demolished in the mid-1990s to make way for a ten-storey wing funded by the Chinese government that was opened in 2000, increasing the number of beds from 700 to 1,100, apparently making it the world's largest children's hospital.

Today, the LRH serves as the national referral centre for paediatric medical and surgical care for children below 12 years of age. It also serves as a local hospital for the population in and around Colombo. The number of beds has been rationalised to 900, so the LRH may not now be the world's largest. Nevertheless, this hospital, its services and achievements,

are of record proportions.

There are 22 wards and six special units, with 450 doctors (both interns and residents), 44 consultants, 600 Registered Nurses, and a total staff of 2,100. The OPD, open around the clock, attends to 2,500-3,000 patients a day (that's one million a year), out of which some 230 are admitted. There are similar 24-hour Accident and Emergency Treatment Unit services. In keeping with the state healthcare policy of the Sri Lankan Government all services are free of charge.

In addition, the LRH acts as a premier teaching hospital under the Ministry of Health, and is responsible for undergraduate and most of the post-graduate medical and surgical paediatric training in Sri Lanka.

The Lady Havelock Hospital for Women and Children, and the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children which it became has undergone much change in the past 116 years apart from nomenclature and specialisation. From the philanthropic concept of a tea planter, the dedication of not one but two British Governors' wives, the initial outstanding public support, and comparatively modest beginnings, arose an iconic medical institution that has steadily developed to provide the entire nation with exemplary paediatric care for children.

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