

Back Ground

The History of Medicine in Sri Lanka has been fashioned over the centuries by a synthesis of several intrinsic and extrinsic factors, some of which were unique to the country. Being an island Sri Lanka insulated to a large extent from external forces influencing medicine.

Sri Lanka was ruled by its own kings from the inception of its written history until 1815, when the British conquered the Kandyan Kingdom. Considerable information on the structure of the medical system that prevailed during this period is available from literary and archaeological sources. The ancient chronicle the Mahawansa, is undoubtedly the richest single source of such information. In that time there were several Hospitals.

The Portuguese and the Dutch who ruled maritime provinces in Sri Lanka built hospitals for the purpose of serving their forces, shipping personnel and their nationals in the country. Hospitals were established in strategic towns, several of which possessed harbour as well. In Portuguese period the hospitals were managed by catholic priests, chiefly the Jesuits. The hospitals were the responsibility of the government, but as funds were often short the Quality of healthcare suffered. Charity played a significant role in their attitude to patients care, Every leading town had an institution known as the 'misericordia' which was a holy house of mercy for relieving the suffering of the poor and the needy. These institutions often looked after the sick and the orphans. There was no fixed method of financing the hospitals. The methods used appear to have varied from time to time and from hospital to hospital. There is evidence that grants received from State, charitable donations and revenue from customs, Pearl fisheries and land allocated to the hospitals were employed for the maintenance of these institutions.

The British captured the maritime provinces from the Dutch in 1796 and annexed the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815. They ruled the country till 1948 when Sri Lanka achieved independence.

The early phase of British medicine belonged to the military who controlled both military and Civil health institutions, With the creation of a separate civil medical department in 1858, a new phase was born by which medical facilities were provided to the civilians by a department free of military control.

The British for well over a Century of their occupation, imported South Indian labour to work in their plantations. This massive influx from a country where communicable diseases such as smallpox and cholera were endemic, posed a constant threat to the health of the local population. Further, the attitude of the British, who considered the health of the plantation worker as an economically important factor which had to be safe guarded at great odds, was a major element in development of the health structure in the country.