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THE LISBON NURSING ASSOCIATION

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The Lisbon Nursing Association owed its foundation to the initiative of Lady de Bunsen, wife of HBM Minister in Lisbon from 1905 to 1906.

Until the end of the 19th century the only nursing facilities available to the British colony - as it was then referred to! - were the relatively inadequate services of one or two local British midwives.

There had been a hospital in the Rua do Alecrim run by a Dr. Lahmeyer but according to Mrs. D. Bucknall, writing in the APN on 10th May 1952, "It was a sad little establishment which called itself 'The British Seamen's Hospital' about which the less said the better. There was nothing British about it but the name".

In cases of illness patients were usually tended at home by relatives or friends and, occasionally, by nuns who, in pairs, would leave their convents for a few hours. Patients with no homes or family had no choice but to be taken to Portuguese hospitals which, in those days, left much to be desired. Although the doctors may have been efficient, the standard of nursing certainly was not and many Britons ended their days in dismal foreign surroundings.

In late 1905 Lady de Bunsen called a meeting of leading members of the British community. Many were reluctant to support her proposal to establish a nursing service as it was thought that the success of the bigger undertaking, that of opening a British Hospital, might be prejudiced. Lady de Bunsen carried the day, a committee was formed with her as President, Miss Astley Campbell as Honorary Secretary, Mrs. M. S. Jayne as Honorary Treasurer and donations and subscribers invited. In fact, the British Hospital did not open until 1910 from which date the two organisations worked harmoniously together whenever possible and necessary.

The donations were needed to meet the initial cost of bringing a trained nurse from England and to provide working capital. Her salary and cost of

accommodation would be met from subscriptions and fees charged for her services to subscribers.

The Rules provided that subscribers should consist of British subjects and American citizens plus a limited number of other nationalities although no criterion for the selection of the latter is stated in the Rules. Subscribers had first call on the services of the nurses but, if not so employed, they could be utilized by non-subscribers at a higher fee. The annual subscription was fixed at £1.1.0 and the nursing fee at £2.2.0 per week, non-subscribers, £4.4.0.

Donations were more than sufficient to cover the travel expenses of the first nurse, Miss Kuys, and provide her with furnished accommodation. The 1906 revenue from the 45 subscribers plus the fees charged for nursing enabled the Honorary Treasurer, Mrs. M. S. Jayne, to report that there was a balance of over £120 to carry forward to the following year. Nurse Kuys had been employed for 38 weeks on seven cases and it had been necessary to engage other local nurses to deal with other cases.

The Association had its charitable aspect in that the Committee had the discretion to permit attendance upon British subjects or American citizens who, within the knowledge of the Committee, might not be in a position to subscribe or pay for nursing.

During 1907, because of the demand, two nurses from Guy's Hospital were brought over for varying periods. In view of this in 1908 it was decided to engage a second nurse and Miss Brown was recruited from England.

As a further service to subscribers a small Red-Cross Depot was established mainly for supplying and hiring out surgical appliances not generally available in Portugal.

Over the years, the Association faced the recurring problem of fluctuating demand, usually, greater than the capacity of one nurse but not always enough to keep two nurses economically employed.

After the opening of the British Hospital in 1910 the greater proportion of the nursing was for maternity cases as the Hospital would only accept such cases if the patient was accompanied by a private nurse.

A succession of nurses was recruited through the Overseas Nursing Association in London usually on two year contracts, and only rarely did a nurse prove unsatisfactory.

The Association prospered sufficiently to enable funds to be set aside and a £100 War Loan was purchased in 1918 and a further £100 in 1926 but the recession of the early 1930's necessitated encashment to make ends meet. In 1936 it was decided that the financial position did not justify bringing a second nurse from England.

However, in 1940, the influx of British diplomats and officials created a demand which made a second nurse an urgent necessity but war-time restrictions delayed her arrival for more than a year. Fortunately, amongst the refugees from Paris was a Miss Drew, a British-trained nurse, who willingly joined the Association. Using free-lance local nurses the Association managed to provide the nursing required until Miss Heys from England reached Lisbon. There were difficulties throughout the war in replacing nurses on the expiry of their contracts. In 1944 because of steeply rising costs the Association was unable to afford the cost of bringing a second nurse from England.

With the end of the war donations and additional subscribers were sought in an effort to raise sufficient funds to recruit a second nurse. Meanwhile, Miss Nolan carried on alone and, as a great majority of the cases were admitted to the British Hospital, it was on several occasions thus made possible for her to nurse two patients at a time which resulted in a healthy surplus for 1945 and gave the Association the necessary confidence to provide two nurses in 1946.

At end of 1945 Mrs. de Moura resigned from the Committee. She had been a founder member and had served the Association for 40 years.

The departure of diplomats and other officials at the end of 1946 made it obvious that it would be unwise to continue with two nurses and, in order to further reduce costs, in 1947 arrangements were made for the remaining nurse to stay at the British Hospital at a reduced rate, the Hospital making use of her services when not required by the Association members, at half fees. However by 1949 the Hospital required the accommodation for its own uses.

Soon after the war ended plans were made to add a floor to the Hospital building, partly to provide nurses accommodation and it was suggested that the Hospital should take over the Association's obligations to subscribers but as the building project was postponed and the Association nurses were not willing to be hospital nurses further discussions were discontinued.

For the next ten years, the Association, usually with two nurses employed, survived, contending as best it could, against rising costs and varying demand.

At the end of 1955 the Committee of the British Hospital pointed out to the Association that several maternity cases were being lost by the Hospital to other institutions. This they attributed to the fact that the combined Hospital and Association fees were above the local maternity Hospital rates. This they felt was due to the high level of fees charged by the Association for the private nursing.

The Association pointed out that the fees covered only the bare cost of the travel expenses, salary, board and lodging of the British trained nurses and no reduction was therefore possible.

The Hospital concluded that by giving maternity cases the choice of either general ward nursing or private nursing by Association nurses hitherto only the latter option had been available- a new lower scale of fees for general ward nursing of maternity cases could be introduced by the Hospital.

The Association Committee foresaw that there was likely to be a wide acceptance of this facility and anticipated that the demand for general nursing, hitherto only about one third of the nurses duties, would not alone be sufficient to make the provision for the community of even one British trained nurse financially viable.

It was, therefore, reluctantly resolved by the Committee to close the Association.

An appeal made to the subscribers produced enough funds to enable the Association to meet all its financial obligations and on 22nd May 1956 the Lisbon Nursing Association formally ceased to exist after just half a century of service to the British and American communities.

The Association was singularly fortunate in the dedication of its officers. Two honorary secretaries served a total of 44 years, Mrs. Adele Lithgow, 10 and, her daughter, Mrs. Ada Johnson 34, and two honorary Treasurers, 33 years, S. H. Williams 11 and A. E. Arnaud, 22.

After closure of the Association, the British Hospital continued to be available to meet the medical and nursing needs of the British community.