Middle Articles

The Hampstead General: Beginning and Ending

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The Hampstead General Hospital is scheduled under the Ministry of Health's hospital building plan to be demolished within the next five to six years. The new Royal Free Hospital will be built on the site.

Many British hospitals in the past were founded by energetic and enterprising members of the medical profession, supported by one or more public-spirited laymen. Such was the origin of the Hampstead General Hospital.

In the nineteenth century, before the coming of "the tube," access from Hampstead to London, and to the West End in particular, was not easy. Horse-buses plied between Swiss Cottage and Oxford Circus and between Heath Street and Tottenham Court Road, but neither was a frequent service. Public transport linking Finchley Road and Adelaide Road to Haverstock Hill was non-existent. Though an advantage to rich residents, this was an unhappy state of affairs for sick people in straitened circumstances needing hospital treatment.

First Hospital

This obviously was in the mind of Dr. Heath Strange, an able and far-sighted general practitioner, when in 1882, with the assistance of a number of laymen, he founded the hospital which was given the name of the Hampstead Home and Nursing Institute.

In May of that year No. 4, South Hill Park Road, on the east side of Haverstock Hill, previously rented by Dr. Heath Strange, was purchased. He had enlisted the interest of a Mr. W. F. Malcolm, who became the first treasurer and remained so for twenty-seven years. The records show that he was a generous contributor to its funds. The children's ward of the present hospital is named after him. Limited space necessitated limiting the benefits of the little hospital to female patients, but there was to be a private ward for either sex. Through lack of money it was decided to postpone arrangements for developing the nursing institute.

By the end of the year fifteen patients had been admitted. The hospital's first report states they paid very little for their treatment and nursing. The statement of income and expenditure for the year ended 31 December 1882 shows receipts of £550 16s. 11d., which included the items £517 5s. 6d. from subscribers and £35 18s. from patients' payments, whereas expenditure was £456 4s. 10d. Salaries of matron and servants were pitifully low at £21 14s. 3d. To this sum was added 19s. 6d. for beer. The accounts of all hospitals in those days show that this beverage had to be given to all staff otherwise there was no chance of recruiting them. Drunkenness was rife among hospital employees, for in addition to the daily allowance they were able to purchase the cheapest beer called porter at 1d. a pint. The authorities must have been well

satisfied that on the first year's working of the hospital £103 12s. 1d. had been saved.

Dr. Heath Strange must have been well known to Sir James Paget, for he visited and inspected the hospital two years after its foundation. Already it was gaining in reputation. There was an increasing demand for admission, so a move to new premises in Nos. 3 and 4 Parliament Hill Road was decided on. The majority of patients were now paying 10s. a week. The number of beds was raised to sixteen—five for female

Dr. Heath Strange. From portrait by Savage Cooper (1905).

patients and three for males in general wards, with two additional rooms containing three and two beds respectively at 21s. and 30s. a week. There were also three private rooms, but no mention is made of the charge for them.

Nursing Institute

At last the authorities felt themselves in a position to start the nursing institute which had been envisaged. This was a remarkable step forward in the efficient care of the sick in their own homes, and demonstrated the enlightened outlook of its

founder. He must have been aware of the successful experiments of Elizabeth Fry in London in 1840 and William Rathbone in Liverpool in nursing the poor, and he must also have known of the missionary work of Mrs. Ranyard's Bible-women nurses in Seven Dials.

But it would seem that Heath Strange did not contemplate district nursing of the poor in Hampstead but rather training women who, when sufficiently qualified, would nurse sick people in their own homes on payment of a fee. He succeeded in doing this. The records show that these benefits were immediately appreciated by Hampstead's inhabitants. But Heath Strange did something more. Whereas it was common practice for surgeons to perform operations in the patients' own homes, by instituting private rooms in his hospital he was enabled to give the general public facilities for being treated surgically under the best conditions, and this so long ago as 1884.

The nurses not only gained practical experience in the wards of the hospital but attended lectures in anatomy, physiology, surgical and medical nursing, and bandaging given by two of Heath Strange's colleagues, Doctors Collingwood Andrews and Ernest Ware, both general practitioners. During the first year of the nursing institute six trained nurses were sent to care for the sick of private families. Each one received a salary of £18 7s. 6d. per annum.

In the report for 1892, under the heading of "Nursing Committee," there appears the following: "This [the Nursing Institute] continues to be a work of great interest and importance. It is conducted upon the same general principles which have been proved to be successful in the training of probationers in the science and art of nursing." It then goes on to state that this training is highly appreciated by the young lady probationers who decide to make nursing the sick the object of their lives. Over and over again in the reports the nurse is referred to as a "lady," indicating the desire of the authorities to draw recruits from the educated classes. It must be remembered that in those days parents frowned on their daughters earning a living. Florence Nightingale's advocacy for educated women to take up nursing had not yet been generally accepted.

"Many Cured"

The hospital's medical report for 1892 reads as follows: "82 cases admitted. The results of treatment had been most satisfactory, many cured, and others relieved. Regret to record three deaths. The general ward under the management of a trained lady nurse and lady probationers. Many private patients who could not be cured had their pain and suffering gently soothed and mitigated."

Four years previously another medical report had stated: "It is gratifying to record that all the cases of operation with but two exceptions resulted in satisfaction to the operator and relief to the patient. One suffering from a strangulated femoral hernia was relieved and her life prolonged by the timely aid of one of your staff assisted by his colleagues." These doctors of seventy-six years ago had every right to be proud of their work.

By 1894 the hospital was well established. Accidents occurring in the neighbourhood were accepted instead of having to be conveyed several miles to one of the hospitals in inner London. The general wards became free to the poor of Hampstead, Highgate, and adjoining neighbourhoods. Patients who were prepared to pay 12s. a week could be attended by their own doctors, but the main work of the hospital was carried out by the honorary staff consisting of general practitioners.

The medical staff had been carefully selected, presumably by Heath Strange, and all in due course became distinguished. Two of them, Collingwood Andrews and Lewis Glover, in spite of busy practices, found time to interest themselves in the work of the borough council and eventually held the office of mayor. Ernest Ware was the best type of general-practitioner surgeon. In later years he was elected to the consultant staff of St. John and St. Elizabeth Hospital. He was particularly skilful at abdominal surgery. Another member of the staff was Frank Scrase, who finally gave up general practice to become a medical officer of health.

New Hospital

So popular did the hospital become with the general public that it was clear that a new hospital was needed. Year after year the medical reports recorded the pressure on beds and the inadequacy of out-patient facilities.

The report for 1900 stated: "The finding of a site for the new hospital, more urgently needed than ever, had not made definite advance until last July when the attention of the Council was drawn to some property at Hampstead Green. This was offered on reasonable terms through the influence of a warm and generous supporter. The Council after receiving the reports of some eminent expert authorities gave the matter their most earnest and careful consideration and decided to accept the offer to utilize this piece of ground for the erection of the new hospital."

The number of beds envisaged was 50, subsequently to be increased to 133. The present complement is 137. The foundation stone was laid in 1902 by Princess Christian of Schleswig Holstein. Three years later she performed the opening ceremony of the completed building, henceforth to be called the Hampstead General Hospital. 1905 also saw the resignation of its founder, Dr. Heath Strange. His portrait (see illustration) now hangs in the board room of the present hospital.

Crisis

The strain on the hospital's finances now steadily increased. In 1907 the King Edward Hospital Fund, already a generous subscriber, was appealed to for additional support. This was agreed to on condition that medical men of consultant status must be appointed to the active staff and that there should be an amalgamation between the Hampstead General and a small hospital situated in Camden Town and known as the North West London.

These proposals gave rise to heated discussions, but the annual report recorded only the final decision. It was natural that the able general practitioners who had helped to develop the hospital and raise it to a state of efficiency should have been indignant that their medical control of it was to be handed over to consultants. In their opposition to the scheme they were supported by a minority of lay members of the council. The majority had their way, resulting in the resignation of four laymen and all the general practitioners. What a pity! Had the doctors held on to their appointments the experiment could have been tried of general practitioners and consultants working together on an equality both in the wards and the out-patient departments.

When the new teaching hospital of the Royal Free is built on the site at Hampstead Green the present building will disappear. It is hoped that in some way the founder, Dr. Heath Strange, will not be forgotten. Such an enlightened and far-sighted general practitioner deserves to be remembered.