Medical College Bengal—A Pioneer Over the Eras

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Published online: 3 August 2012
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Before any systematic attempt was made in the Indian subcontinent to impart instruction in western medicine, two systems were already existent in the region: the Hindu or Ayurvedic system and the Arabic or Unani system. Although history was witness to the remarkable progress made by ancient physicians and surgeons in ancient India, there came a period when this progress stagnated. In the early nineteenth century, when the science and art of healing was making remarkable progress in the western world, no corresponding development was taking place in the Indian subcontinent. The British Government was loath to entrust the health of its officers in the hands of the ‘native’ doctors, and had to get ‘suitably’ trained medical personnel from Europe. After a point, they realized that this was not a practical solution to the problem and a system of imparting education in western medicine had to be started in the Indian subcontinent. This led to the publication of an order on June 21, 1822, to start the first medical school in British India, exclusively for the Europeans.

This system continued till 1834, when it was decided to form a medical college for Indians, where western medicine would be taught. On January 28, 1835, a new era commenced on the order of His Lordship William Bentinck. The first medical college of Asia was built with appointment of Assistant Surgeon M.J. Bramley (Fig. 1) as the first Principal of Medical College Hospital. Fifty young men between the ages

of 14 and 20, without distinction of caste or creed, were admitted to study for a period of 4 years. They received a monthly stipend of ₹ 7. English was the medium of instruction, and European methods of medical education were strictly adhered to. On October, 30, 1838, eleven students appeared for the first examination, of whom, Uma Charan Sett, Dwarka Nath Gupta, Raj Kisto Dey, and Nobin Chunder Mitter were considered to have ‘successfully answered the tests’. Thus, the door to western medical education opened for the first time in the east.

The deep-rooted prejudice against the study of anatomy and dissection was a major hurdle to overcome, but this was also overcome on January 10, 1836, when Pandit Madhusudan Gupta (Fig. 2) did the first cadaveric dissection under the guidance of Dr. Goodeve.

In 1845, the college remodelled its system of instruction to obtain the recognition of The Royal College of Surgeons of England and the University of London. To meet the requirements of recognition, certain changes had to be made in the curriculum. More importantly, a larger space was required to accommodate a hospital with the college.

This led to the laying of the foundation stone of a new building in 1848 by Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General of India, to shift the premises of Medical College Hospital. This ‘MCH Building’ (Fig. 3) was officially inaugurated in 1852 to accommodate 350 patients. It is the oldest building in the premises and is the most familiar impression, when we think of this great institution. Dr. Henry Goodeve was the first professor of Medicine, although there was no separate department of Medicine at that time.

In 1857, the University of Calcutta was founded and Medical College got affiliated to it. This led to further

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Fig. 1 M.J. Bramley, the first Principal of Medical College

modernization and modifications in the curriculum. Since then, the university has held the entrance examination as well as the pass-out examinations which conferred the Bachelor of Medicine (M.B.) degree to the students.

Fig. 2 Pandit Madhusudan Gupta

In 1868, a proposal was put to start teaching Midwifery. This led to the building of the 100-bedded Eden Hospital (Fig. 4) in 1881, which was formally inaugurated by Sir Ashley Eden, Lt. Governor General of Bengal on April 19, 1882. An isolation ward to the north of Eden Hospital was built to accommodate the cholera patients. This was the first example of an isolation ward in Asia. It was here that Sir Leonard Rogers carried out his historical research on cholera. When the cholera ward was shifted elsewhere, this ward was converted to a septic ward for Eden Hospital, the first of its kind in the subcontinent. Over the years, Eden Hospital has grown, to become a 259-bedded obstetrics and gynecology unit of Medical College Hospital today.

Year 1884 saw the advent of another era when Mrs. Kadambini Ganguly (Fig. 5) became the first lady student to get admitted to Medical College Hospital, though Miss Bidhumukhi Bose and Miss Virginia Mary Mitter were the first ones to graduate in 1889.

Year 1888 saw the first steam laundry being installed in Medical College, leading to the commencement of an era where linen and dressings were “steamed” prior to usage on patients.

The college saw a slow but steady expansion from the mid to end of the nineteenth century. Between 1860 and 1894, there were two surgeons in Medical College Hospital, but their wards and operation theatres were housed with the medicine wards itself. In 1899, two great minds—Principal G. Bomford and Surgeon Richard Havelock Charles foresaw that it was mandatory to have a separate modern surgical building.

In 1904, Sir Havelock Charles wrote:

“If we are to have a surgical block, let us have one above reproach in itself, and in its surroundings—one that our successors will not scorn us for the legacy we leave them—one that can be shown to professional visitors from foreign countries without the blush of shame on our faces.”

This was the background thought that ultimately culminated in the materialization of the Prince of Wales Hospital (the surgical block of Medical College Hospital), which became functional in 1910 (Fig. 6). It was so named to commemorate the visit of the then Prince of Wales (who later became King George V) to India. On March 22, 1911, the building was officially inaugurated by H.E. Lady Hardinge in the presence of a galaxy of dignitaries.

Time flew by, and with the demand for ‘Indianization’ of the staff, posts of additional surgeons were created to incorporate Indian doctors into the system. In 1934, Dr. L.M. Banerjee (Fig. 7) became the first Indian to become Professor of Surgery. After independence, in 1947, Dr. Panchanan Chatterjee (Fig. 8), another very renowned surgeon, became

Fig. 3 MCH Building

Professor of Surgery. His clinical acumen and empathy for patients was an example for everybody to learn from. Another jewel in the crown was Prof. Subodh Datta (Fig. 9) who became Professor-Director in 1952. He was a direct disciple of Lord Moynihan.

Since that historic day in 1911, a hundred years have passed. The Department of Surgery in Medical College Hospital has moved from strength to strength. Modernization and changes have occurred, the greatest being rechristening of Prince of Wales Hospital (PWH) to David Hare Block (DHB) in 1976, to pay tribute to the noted philanthropist and only nonmedical Principal of Medical College, on his bicentennial birth celebration. It currently hosts 150 elective beds of the department of surgery, a modern OT complex, and administrative offices of the department.

Medical College has created luminaries par excellence over the years. Sir Richard Havelock Charles, Professor of

Surgery between 1895 and 1905, was the originator of the Charles' operation for filariasis. Sir Leonard Rogers introduced the use of intravenous hypertonic saline in the treatment of cholera in 1911. Sir U.N. Brahmachari discovered urea stibamine for the treatment of kalaazar in 1922. Dr. Nilratan Sarkar (Fig. 10), after whom the Campbell Medical School was renamed, was another great luminary from this institute. Bharat Ratna Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy (Fig. 11) was another great son of this institute. He was the second chief minister of West Bengal, and his birth and death anniversary on July 1 is celebrated all over the country as Doctors' Day. He was one of the very few persons who completed his MRCP and FRCS simultaneously.

In 1929, Sir Kedar Nath Das wrote the world-famous treatise on obstetric forceps. Another gynecologist, Dr. Subodh Mitra, was the pioneer of Mitra's operation for carcinoma cervix (extended radical vaginal hysterectomy with extraperitoneal lym-

Fig. 4 Eden Hospital

Fig. 5 Kadambini Ganguly

phadenectomy). The noted cardiothoracic surgeon, Dr. Ajit Kumar Basu, achieved international fame for his work on noncirrhotic portal fibrosis. Prof. Subir Chatterjee, the noted pediatric surgeon who did the first surgery for esophageal atresia and separation of conjoined twins in India, is another bright son of this institution. Two other great names require special mention, those of Sir Ronald Ross and Sir Robert Koch, both Nobel laureates, who worked in Medical College during an important phase of their career.

Over the last 60 years, Medical College has moved from one milestone to another. Superspeciality departments were

Fig. 7 Prof. L.M. Banerjee

started in different subjects. The sixties saw the setting up of independent neurosurgery and plastic surgery departments. Although a thoracic unit was functional since the sixties, an independent department started functioning in 1981. The surgical gastroenterology unit was upgraded to a department in 2003, while 2004 saw the pediatric surgery unit becoming a separate department. All the surgical departments are now housed in separate wards with state of the art operation theatres, equipped with modern endoscopic and laparoscopic instruments.

Medical College Bengal continues to inspire and train generations of doctors and serve the common person of the region even today. Every year 250 undergraduate and over

Fig. 6 Prince of Wales Hospital (David Hare Block)

Fig. 8 Prof. Panchanan Chatterjee

Fig. 10 Dr. Nil Ratan Sarkar

Fig. 9 Prof. Subodh Datta

Fig. 11 Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy

150 postgraduate students pass out from this great institute. Now, this 177-year-old institute has grown from 350 beds to over 1500 beds. As we look up to this great institute, we bow our heads in gratitude to our forefathers, who dared to dream and worked to fulfill their dreams. We pledge to continue to dream new dreams, keep abreast with the changing times, and strive to overcome all hurdles to turn our dreams into reality.

Every effort has been made by the authors to present a brief yet accurate history of the first medical college of Asia. Any unintentional error may kindly be excused.

Acknowledgments Prof. Utpal Kumar Datta, Principal, Medical College, Kolkata.
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