

# The Work of the District Nurse in Gozo in the Past

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About one hundred years ago, the health system in the community, in Gozo as in Malta, consisted of the District Medical Officer (DMO) who was resident in the district and was responsible for the health of the people of that district. This service was introduced by Governor Sir Richard More O'Ferrell in 1848.<sup>1</sup> Gozo was divided into four districts. District A consisted of Victoria, Żebbuġ, Għarb, Għasri, San Lawrenz, Kerċem, and Santa Luċija. District B consisted of Nadur, Qala, Għajnsielem, Mġarr Harbour and Comino. District C of Xewkija, Sannat and Munxar. District D of Xagħra, and Ta' Hammet. In 1920 the DMOs of the districts were as follows: A: Dr Tommaso Cauchi, B: Dr Peter Paul Agius, C: Dr Daniel Marguerat, and D: Dr Joseph Micallef. They had an annual salary of £180 with £30 extra if they also did extra service like physician i/c of Lazzaretto and £5 extra for acting as anaesthetist at the Gozo Hospital.<sup>2</sup> They could also practice privately. The DMO used to attend the village clinic (*berġa*) every day and visit the village school to examine the children. To help him he had a nurse, also called a district nurse, as she was also a resident of the district and would always be with the doctor in the performance of their duties.

So, the nurse would always be with the doctor when he attended the *berġa*. She oversaw the making of medications for minor injuries, treating cases of eye disease and especially cases of trachoma which was very common, and also visiting mothers at home when they gave birth. The district nurse was responsible for the health of the children and advised the mothers on food and cleanliness in raising the young children. This was done under the care and guidance of the DMO, and she also made sure that what the doctor ordered was done.

The district nurse also visited the village school regularly with the doctor and administered all which the doctor prescribed as treatment especially in the treatment of the numerous cases of trachoma disease which would take a long time to heal.

When there were cases of communicable diseases reported, the district nurse would make sure that the children remained at home for a period of quarantine and that the doctor's instructions would be followed. She kept a register of children she visited, and worked in collaboration with the headmaster of the village school.

She also had a duty to inform the doctor and consequently the public health authorities if she noticed any conditions in the homes which were a risk to the health of the children or other family members such as lack of ventilation, lack of cleanliness, unfavourable food for children and any possible illness, such as lice on children or any suspicion of other communicable diseases, parental neglect or extreme poverty.

The district nurse was also required to keep a record of her daily work detailing the families she had seen and the illnesses and conditions she had treated. This register would be inspected regularly by the DMO and monthly by the public health doctor and even in case of need by the Chief Government Physician. The district nurse could also be forced to do other work if needed in a nursing home and even orphanages.

Nurses were required to wear a white uniform while performing their duties. The material for the uniform could be bought from a shop in St John's Square, Valletta. The hat could be bought at another store in the city from Strada Forni. The badge was given away for free by the department. To show that they were district nurses they would have a small piece of ribbon next to the badge.

It is worth mentioning that most of these district nurses were Maltese. They had to settle in Gozo and therefore were given an allowance to cover their rent and transport costs as they would need to visit their relatives in Malta. They generally worked in Gozo for a period of two years but as from 1930

1 National Archives CSG/04/21 Letter Dr Mifsud 18-XII-1848 pp.303/304.

2 Malta Blue Book (1921) L25.



[Source <http://mmdna.com/>]

they were required to work in Gozo for three years. They therefore claimed that their allowances be increased and as an example they cited that the Commissioner for Gozo had an annual allowance of £50. Their request was rejected, however the department later allowed them to rent a car at the rate of one shilling per hour which was refunded when they presented a receipt.

To avoid extra expenses on the department, in December 1936 an order was issued for the district nurses to be resident in the district where they worked. This measure was not practicable for all the districts because, for example, the nurse responsible for District A (Victoria, Żebbuġ [including Marsalforn], Għarb, Għasri, San Lawrenz, and Kerċem [including Santa Luċija]) had a large area to cover and she argued that it would have been better for her if she had stayed in Victoria. In addition, it would still have cost a lot to move from one village to another. This was also true for sanitary inspectors. This did not go down well with the nurses, and they complained that they were having trouble finding a place to rent in their district. There was often correspondence between several nurses and the department about their problems. In 1937 the transportation problem for health inspectors was solved by allowing them to use their car for the compensation of three shillings per mile. The present author found no evidence showing that this arrangement applied to district nurses as well. However, the district midwife was paid £30 as compensation for renting a place to live in the district.



[Source <http://mmdna.com/>]

As most of the district nurses hailed from Malta, they visited their relatives in Malta for the weekends. It was common for several of them to report illness the following Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Because of this routine 'abuse', they were asked to present a medical certificate on the first day of illness proving that they were, in fact, sick.

At the end of the Second World War, most of the work done by district nurses was taken over by the nurses of the Malta Memorial District Nursing Association (MMDNA), a voluntary non-profit and non-governmental organisation which provided district nursing services to the islands of Malta and Gozo for seventy years.

#### References

Administrative Register not catalogued (1911-1945). Public Health Office, Victoria, Gozo.

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