

The concept and range of charitable institutions up to World War I

Paul Cassar

The so-called Charitable Institutions of Malta and Gozo were organizations devoted to relieving the poor financially; providing them with food and shelter; nursing and treating them when sick either in their own homes or in hospitals; providing care for the aged and the mentally ill and assisting the helpless in any other way such as protecting unwanted babies and orphans and ransoming slaves. In practice all these activities took the form of three services:

1. Hospital Services
2. District Medical Service
3. Social Welfare

Hospital Services

(1) The earliest evidence of such institutions in the Maltese Islands is co-eval with the emergence in our historical records of the first hospital that we know of, i.e. SANTO SPIRITO HOSPITAL at Rabat, near Mdina, in the year 1372 when it was under the direction of a Franciscan Friar of the Minor Conventuals whose monastery was very close to the hospital. It contributed two forms of charity - nursing and treating the sick poor and receiving, and caring for, foundlings. This hospital expanded its activities with the passage of time and continued to function until 1967 when it was closed down by government for reasons of economy. Three other hospitals were founded in the 15th century but we know very little about them. These were:

(2) ST PETER'S HOSPITAL at Mdina, which was reserved exclusively for women and which in 1418 was turned into a monastery for the nuns of the Order of St Benedict. This monastery, as restored in 1652, still occupies the original site of the hospital.

(3) In 1418, Margaret of Aragon, daughter of William, natural son of King Frederick III of Sicily, and wife of the governor of Mdina, Giacomo di Pellegrino, left a bequest for the setting up of another hospital but we do not know anything else about this foundation.

(4) The other hospital was that of ST JULIAN in the citadel of Gozo founded in 1454 by private initiative. This hospital, meant only for women, originated as a hospice for pilgrims. It was later enriched by various donations and by 1575 it was also known as the HOSPITAL of ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST and of SS. COSMAS AND DAMIAN. It was replaced in 1783 by a larger one at Rabat. The Bishop Mgr V. Labini contributed towards the cost of its construction and bequeathed to it one-third of his property. When completed it accommodated 50 sick women but it also received unmarried, pregnant women who sought refuge under its roof at the approach of delivery. It had, besides, a "ruota" or cradle for the deposition of unwanted babies. This hospital ceased to function in 1838 when the patients were transferred to the HOSPITAL of ST JOHN THE BAPTIST.

(5) Another hospital was founded at Rabat, Gozo, in 1719 by the Rev. Gio Maria Camilleri but it was not built until ten years later under the title of HOSPITAL OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST AND ST ANTHONY OF PADUA. Its administration was entrusted to the Municipality of Gozo until 1818 when it was taken over by the Collector of Inland Revenue and later by the Department of Charitable Institutions. It catered for patients of both sexes. On the occasion of Queen Victoria's jubilee in 1887 it was renamed VICTORIA HOSPITAL and under this title it remained in existence until the very recent opening of the new CRAIG HOSPITAL in that island.

(6) A HOSPITAL FOR INCURABLE WOMEN was established by a Siennese lady, Caterina Scappi, in 1625 at Valletta. By 1631, however, this hospital was being subsidised by the Order of St John. Following Scappi's death in 1655, the Grand Hospitaller claimed the right to administer the women's hospital. The Ordinary Council of the Order decided to close down the hospital in accordance with the Capitular Ordinations

Keywords

Social services, welfare state establishment

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The Editorial Board is honoured to be able to publish a lecture delivered by Dr Paul Cassar to students at the Department of Economics & Social Services, Social Policy and Social Services in Malta, University of Malta, 8th February 1978

of 1631 which condemned the practice of maintaining a home for incurables apart from the Holy Infirmary. This step was soon regretted. One class of patients who had benefited from the care afforded by the hospital were the public women who had availed themselves of the mercurial treatment provided for the cure of syphilis. With the suppression of the hospital all means of checking the spread of venereal disease were lost so that in the words of a contemporary writer they "infected the whole island with the French disease". This circumstance moved Grandmaster Martin de Redin to reopen the hospital in 1659 under the overall supervision of the Grand Hospitalier. The revenues of the hospital were augmented in 1717 by the bequest of Flaminia Valenti. Extensive structural alterations were carried out in the 18th century so that its bed complement was 230 in 1786. Besides medical and surgical patients, it also received the mentally sick who were kept in the basement and were restrained by means of chains attached to the wall when they became agitated. Maternity cases were admitted too. A midwife was available for normal deliveries but cases of difficult labour were attended to by the Senior Surgeon. Maltese women, however, were very reluctant to avail themselves of the services of the doctor during labour as they objected to exposing their bodies to the sight of a male medical practitioner; so much so that when in 1831 a register was kept recording the number of women accepting or refusing the assistance of a male practitioner, it was found that those who declined his help were more numerous than those who accepted it - a circumstance which led the hospital authorities to record their "regret that so much prejudice should exist on this subject".

By the early 40s the women's hospital was accepting sick children for treatment and the custom was introduced of allowing their mothers to reside in the hospital to nurse their infants and children. In July 1841 there were no fewer than 40 such mothers staying in the hospital, but these arrangements only lasted until the mid century, when patients suffering from acute diseases were transferred to the Central Civil Hospital at Floriana. Only those labouring under chronic illnesses remained at the Women's Hospital but these, too, were removed in 1892 to the new HOSPITAL FOR THE AGED AND INFIRM at Mgieret.

(7) The CENTRAL HOSPITAL at Floriana was set up in 1850 in a building erected more than 100 years previously and which was never meant to serve as a hospital. The CENTRAL HOSPITAL admitted the acutely sick of both sexes. Its site was an unhappy one. It adjoined the military barracks of Floriana and the patients had to endure the noise of army activities and the clamour of bugles and drums. Its social environs were far from ideal. Two wine shops existed opposite the main entrance and there soldiers and sailors used to congregate. The Comptroller of Charitable Institutions thus described the scene in the 1870s: "In their drinking bouts they would sing in chorus and positively deafen the neighbourhood and annoy particularly the suffering sick with their yells and wild notes". Apart from these environmental handicaps, overcrowding became so marked between 1878 and 1898 that some of the patients had to be

accommodated in corridors as the wards were full; others were discharged from hospital before they had completely recovered from their illness while others were refused admission. In 1885 the Comptroller of Charitable Institutions had prepared a plan for the erection of a new hospital with a complement of 354 beds, but although officialdom agreed that the provision of a new building was "an urgent necessity", nothing was done in the following decades until the foundation stone of a new hospital - now ST LUKE'S HOSPITAL - was laid on Gwardamanga Hill in April 1930.

(8) Care for the elderly poor has been provided both by the state and by private individuals. The first government asylum for old and infirm men and women was set up in 1729 when some of the gunpowder stores of the Order of St John at Floriana were converted into a poorhouse. The building was originally built for the manufacture and storage of gunpowder in 1665 and so it is not surprising that the accommodation provided for the inmates was unsatisfactory both as regards the number of beds and as regards comfort. With the object of having a better place for the reception and maintenance of destitute old men and women, Grandmaster Era Antonio Manoel de Vilhena founded the Casa di Carita` (House of Charity) on 16th December 1732 in the vicinity of the former building which it replaced. By 1733 the population of this asylum averaged 380 inmates a year. It was supported by funds from the Vilhena foundation, the Municipality of Valletta, the imposition of a tax on insurance policies and by the creation of a monopoly in favour of the asylum of the sale of sublimate. The title of OSPIZIO was conferred on the institution in 1785. In 1798 it received some of the Penitents or reformed prostitutes that had been formerly accommodated in the Magdalen Asylum at Valletta and at the beginning of the 19th century, the foundlings, previously cared for at the Holy Infirmary, and women prisoners were also transferred to the Ospizio. To this jumble of humanity, the male and female mental patients were added in 1816.

In January 1864, the population of the asylum had reached the figure of 700. By then action had been taken by government to allocate funds for the erection of an appropriate building but it was not until 1892 that the new ASYLUM FOR THE AGED AND INFIRM or POOR HOUSE was opened at Mgieret.

In Gozo an OSPIZIO was set up in a building adjacent to ST JOHN THE BAPTIST' HOSPITAL in 1851, its entire complement of 172 beds being occupied by the end of that year. It continued to function well into the present century.

(9) The first private institution devoted exclusively to the care of the aged and infirm was founded in 1654 by the Maltese physician, Dr Nicola Saura, at Rabat, the building being commenced in 1667. Other benefactors endowed it with their property. The institution is still known as SAURA HOSPITAL and is still in existence, entrusted to the care of the Sisters of Charity.

(10) a similar institution was established in 1788 at Zebbug, Malta, under the title of ST JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL. It remains in operation to this day under the direction of the nuns of the Tertiary Order of St Francis who also run a small asylum, for

needy old women at Senglea, known as ST ANNE'S HOSPITAL founded, on private initiative, in 1794.

(11) The last institution for old infirm people came into being in 1880 through the efforts of the Society of the Little Sisters of the Poor who still carry on this charitable mission, at ST PAUL'S HOME at Hamrun, thanks to support from private contributions.

(12) Compared with the organised care of the physically sick and the elderly, that of mental patients was late in emerging. In fact it was not until 1837 that an ad hoc institution was set up by government. It was housed in a building at Floriana which was formerly the residence of Bali Fra Fabrizio Franconi. The new institution thus became known as FRANCONI ASYLUM besides LUNATIC ASYLUM. To it the 80 mental patients that up to that year were being kept at the Ospizio were transferred. The place has been described by an eyewitness as having been no better than a prison. The patients were kept chained to walls; they were beaten when restless or restrained in strait jackets or secluded in cells and punished for swearing or tearing their clothes. All this was changed by Dr Thomas Chetcuti when he took over the management of the asylum in 1839 but in spite of his efforts the asylum remained structurally unsuitable and could not lend itself to the desired reforms. Overcrowding, disrupted the nursing arrangements, personal hygiene was neglected and insubordination became rife among the attendants. Work on a new asylum was commenced in 1853, the institution being opened in 1861 at Attard for the reception of the 248 patients of Villa Franconi. The building at Attard, with modifications and additions, still functions as the only mental hospital in Malta.

District Medical Service

As already mentioned the existence of a district medical service run by the state for the indigent was centred at Mdina and can be traced back to the last quarter of the 15th century. It was expanded, following the advent of the Order of St John to Malta to Valletta and to the three cities round the Grand Harbour. By the first quarter of the 18th century, a domiciliary service by physicians and surgeons was available for poor sick women who could not be admitted to the Women's Hospital. These patients were entitled to free treatment and medicines and also to the issue of food and financial relief. These were distributed by eight elderly women - called *pitanziere* - who continued to be on the staff of the alms-giving section of the Charitable Institution until 1839. Financial and medical help was given likewise to the poor blind, the disabled, the leprous and the scrofulous. Soup was distributed morning and evening, from the Holy Infirmary at Valletta to beggars and invalids while bandages, crutches, used linen and blankets were given to the needy.

The District Medical Service was extended under British rule with the establishment of Government Dispensaries in various towns and villages. The first such dispensary being opened in Valletta in 1852 at the Auberge d'Italie. It was known as the *Albergo dei poveri* whence the Maltese derivation of *il-berga* by which name all government dispensaries are known to this

day. By 1849 there were 21 physicians running these places. Their duties ranged from attendance on the poor sick, affording professional help in all cases of accidental injuries, assisting women in difficult cases of delivery, vaccinating the children of the poor and drawing up certificates to paupers for admission into the Poor House and for the issue of out-door relief. This service is still in existence.

Social Welfare

In addition to the medical arrangements we have considered, the Charitable Institutions comprised the following social welfare services:

(1) **FOUNDLINGS HOME.** The reception and care of unwanted babies by Santo Spirito Hospital and by the Holy Infirmary has already been alluded to. Wet nurses and foster-mothers were provided for these abandoned infants and the practice of adoption, by means of a legal instrument, was encouraged during the time of the Order of St John. Towards the end of the 18th century the number of exposed children deposited at the Holy Infirmary was just over 200 a year. On attaining the age of eight years, the boys were apprenticed to artisans to learn a trade until they reached their 16th year. The girls were admitted into the so-called **CONSERVATORIO** at Floriana until at 20 years they were settled in marriage or in employment.

(2) The **CONSERVATORIO** was founded in 1734 by Grandmaster Antonio Manoel de Vilhena for the reception of poor young women and grown-up exposed girls who were taught various crafts. It lasted until 1836 by which time it had become known as the **HOUSE OF INDUSTRY**. The building was later converted into the **CENTRAL HOSPITAL**.

(3) An **ORPHAN ASYLUM** was set up in Valletta in 1851 in the erstwhile monastery of St Mary Magdalen which had been founded in 1595, through the efforts of Grandmaster Hughes Loubenx Verdalle, for the reception of reformed prostitutes under the care of the nuns of St Ursola. This orphanage remained in service until the outbreak of World War II under the direction of the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paule.

(4) The **MONTE DI PIETA'** or Public Pawn Brokery was established in 1597 with the object of lending moneys to the distressed at reasonable interest on the security of property given in pawn such as gold and silver articles. The origin of this institution stems from the generosity of a Knight of the priory of Portugal who donated a sum of money to set it up.

(5) The **MONTE DE REDENZIONE** was founded in 1607 by donations for the ransom from slavery of Maltese citizens who had fallen into the hands of the Moslems and who had no means of their own to buy their freedom. In 1618 its funds were enriched by the bequest of Caterina Vitali who left the larger part of her property, including farmlands at Selmun, to this institution. Vitali's bequest is recorded in the painting by A. Favray over the altar of Selmun Church. Its funds were subsequently consolidated with those of the *Monte di Pietà* at the time of Grandmaster Emanuel de Rohan (1787), the new combination

being given the title of Monte di Pietà e di Redenzione until, with the suppression of slavery under British rule, it reverted to its original role of public pawn brokery - a function which it has continued to exercise until the present time.

Administration of Charitable Institutions

The administrative organization of the Charitable Institutions grew up haphazardly, a form of management being devised for each institution as it came into being. They were, in fact, administered independently of one another at the time of the Order of St John, there being no central authority to co-ordinate their activities.

The first attempts to bring all these institutions under one administrative head were made in 1816 by the British Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland who introduced a uniform system of control for them with a view to safeguard the public treasury against unnecessary expenditure. From 1st February 1816, there came into being the Committee of the Charitable Institutions. In 1851 the Board of Commissioners of Charity replaced the former Committee and in 1858 the office of Comptroller of Charitable Institutions was created. This office was abolished only as recently as 1937 when the medical services were made the responsibility of the Chief Government Medical Officer and the other welfare activities distributed under various departments.

It is clear that the tradition of charity underlying the medical and welfare services died very hard even when much of the

burden of their maintenance and expansion was ultimately shouldered by the state and funded from general taxation.

Summary

The institutions we have just considered were founded by private initiative, by the church and by the state. In retrospect we can discern in them the first attempts at the establishment of the welfare state through the provision of minimum standards of care for the indigent, for the sick poor, for abandoned children and for the helpless in other ways; but for many years no one had the foresight to see that the so-called Charitable Institutions were destined to evolve into one of the essential services of the country. It was only at the beginning of the 1940s that the provision of adequate medical and social services for all began to be conceived as constituting one of the fundamental rights of citizenship.

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Dr Paul Cassar was born at Zejtun, Malta on the 29th June 1914. He received his education at the Lyceum and at the Royal University of Malta [1933-40] from where he qualified as Ph.C. in 1936, B.Sc. in 1937 and M.D. in 1940. After his qualification in 1940, he worked as a Medical Officer in the emergency hospital services during the war receiving mention in the Malta Government Gazette in 1944 for "Exceptionally Meritorious and Devoted Service" during World War II.

He furthered his post-graduate training in psychiatry during 1943-45 in several hospitals in the U.K. including the National Hospital Queen's Square, the Maida Vale Hospital for Nervous Disease, Mill Hill Neurosis Hospital, and Maudsley Hospital in London, and the Royal Edinburgh Mental Hospital. He qualified as a specialist psychiatrist obtaining a Diploma in Psychological Medicine from the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of London in 1944. He was elected in 1971 as founding fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. After his postgraduate specialization [1945-1964], he served regularly a physician-psychiatrist in the Hospital for Mental Disease - our Lady of Mount Carmel Hospital - in Malta. He was appointed to the post of Physician Superintendent of the Hospital for Mental Disease in 1963, but turned down the post as it interfered with his clinical and academic duties. He was appointed Consultant Psychiatrist in the Medical and Health Department in 1964. He also served as Honorary Consultant to the Kennedy Memorial Child Guidance Clinic. He further contributed to the teaching and examination of psychiatry and forensic medicine at the University of Malta in the Faculties of Medicine & Surgery and of Laws. He also contributed towards the training of the Police Corps members. During 1976-78, he served as Chairman of the Commission for the Development of Higher Education. He also served as a member of the St. Luke's Hospital Management Committee and of the Mental Health Tribunal.

He was a fellow of the Royal Historical Society of London, a member of the International Academy of the History of Pharmacy, and past-President of the British Medical Association [Malta Branch]. He also served as a member of the Antiquities Board and as Chairman of the Advisory Committee of the National Library, Serving Brother in The Grand Priory of the British Realm of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem (appointed: 17th July 1967), and Honorary Life Member of the St John Ambulance Brigade (appointed: 14th March 1946).

Besides his clinical and academic contributions in the field of his clinical specialty, Dr. Cassar has contributed in a monumental fashion to the promotion of Maltese Medical History publishing a large number of books, monographs and articles relating to medical history. For his achievements he was made an Honorary Fellow of the University of Malta and awarded a Doctorate in Literature [honoris causa] by the University of Malta in 1984 and also received the Midalja għall-Qadi tar-Repubblika on the 13th December 1995. He was raised to the rank of Cross Commander of the Order of Merit of the Sovereign Military Order of St. John on the 4th April 1995.

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