

Whither Singapore Psychiatry? How the Mental Hospital Survived the Japanese Occupation and the Post-War Years (Part I)

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The Japanese Occupation

Singapore fell to the conquering Japanese troops on 15 February 1942 and a grim period in the history of Singapore psychiatry was thus ushered in. Shortly before Singapore capitulated, many mental patients were returned to their homes and about 500 quieter ones transferred to St John's island, the colony's quarantine station⁽¹⁾. The transfer was to ease the congestion at the Mental Hospital and in anticipation of converting the hospital into a General Hospital. The medical staff of the Mental Hospital were in charge of these inmates and were assisted by the staff of the Quarantine Station. Many patients died of starvation at St John's island, and when they returned to the Mental Hospital at the end of April 1942, their numbers were greatly diminished.

Singapore was renamed *Syonan*, 'Light of the South', for the period of the Japanese Occupation from February 1942 to September 1945. Ironically, the Japanese Occupation cast a shadow of darkness over Singapore. For the *Syonan* years, the Mental Hospital became the Japanese Civilian and Military Hospital. Years of progress were disrupted and to a large extent, wiped out by the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation. Scarcity of material was aggravated by problems of looting as illustrated by the following accounts:

"Aside from the few private clinics which faced similar shortages of medical supplies, there were the government hospitals... the General Hospital was cleared for Japanese use when they first took over Singapore. Dr Benjamin Chew (born in 1907) who was on the staff there recalls that they were instructed not to take away anything, but there were people who sneaked out a few supplies.... Together with their smuggled medicines and instruments, the doctors, nurses and some of the patients who were too ill to be discharged went to the Mental Hospital which became the *Miyako Byoin*. The mental patients had been discharged earlier. Also evacuated were the families of the doctors who were living in the quarters on the hospital grounds"⁽²⁾.

"The Japanese high command agreed that patients in the General Hospital should be transferred to the Mental Hospital buildings. These buildings had been partly emptied ten days before, and could have

provided reasonable space and equipment for the patients who were to be transferred. But when the move began it was found that the most useful part of the buildings had been occupied by a Japanese field unit. They had taken possession of the central buildings, with the stores of medical equipment and food, the kitchens, operation theatre and laboratories. They left nothing but the empty shells of wards.

There were 3,400 patients to be moved. Eleven hundred were military patients who were moved to the improvised army hospitals; 700 were moved to the Mental Hospital, and the rest, all who were able to walk, found their way home. The transfer of 700 patients from the General Hospital to the Mental Hospital building, was a grim business. Ambulance transport was provided by the army, but all the rest of the work had to be done by the senior members of the regular medical staff and of the Medical Auxiliary Service. Now that the battle was lost, the hospital servants, both at the General Hospital and the Mental Hospital had faded away to fend for themselves. The only equipment that could be taken was what could be carried on stretchers, along with the patients and concealed under their blankets. At the Mental Hospital there were no beds, no utensils, no water and no food. There were 700 patients, all seriously wounded, and an exhausted staff.

Very valuable assistance in the way of providing food was given by the inmates of the Leper Settlement, which is adjacent. They gave abundantly of their stocks of rice, and vegetables, pork and eggs from their farm. They had been supplying farm produce to the General Hospital also during the last week, when other sources of fresh vegetables had failed. Under the leadership of the head patient, the lepers did a great deal to help"⁽³⁾.

Dr J M J Supramaniam, the Deputy Director of Medical Services (Hospitals) in 1978, recalled that during the Japanese Occupation:

"I had the misfortune of having been injured by Japanese shelling the day before the surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942. On the day of the surrender or the day after, as a civilian casualty with other casualties, I was transferred in a military truck to the Mental Hospital (then renamed Miyako Hospital). I remember it was only after many hours of hunger that I had my first meal on a hard wooden

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bunk in one of the wards of the hospital. The meal was a plain ball of rice on a leaf that had been plucked from a tree and it tasted "delicious"! After my recovery from my shell injury, being cut off from the rest of my family in Malaya and being without a job, I worked as a medical and health servant for about 2 months at a salary of \$20 a month. I recall living in what is at present one of your stores above ward 23. Even though those were very difficult and trying times, I recollect that there used to be an atmosphere of cordiality and friendliness among most of the staff"⁽⁴⁾.

On 17 February 1942, most of the British European civilians in Singapore were assembled and made to walk to the first internment camp, which consisted of a police station and a group of houses at the seaside about seven miles from Singapore⁽³⁾. The following accounts cast some light on the mental health of these victims:

"Throughout the whole period of internment, the absence of any serious mental abnormality was very remarkable. There were a few instances of deterioration from the normal standards of decent conduct, of men who would grovel in a gutter for a cigarette end or a scrap of food, or who failed to keep themselves clean. But these were very exceptional.

There were only two suicides, and this, in a population of over 3,000, nearly all middle-aged, over a period of three and a half years, is less than would be expected from the same population in normal times. There were only three or four cases of psychosis, and psychosomatic diseases appeared to be rarer than in normal civil life. In many respects, life in the internment camp had the features which are supposed to be curative in a mental hospital. The diet was not stimulating, there was no alcohol, the sexes were segregated, there was plenty of physical toil which served as occupational therapy, there was little need to make decisions, and nothing to be gained by worrying about the future since nothing could be done about it.

The mental effects of internment became more evident after release, when the extent from inability to make decisions or to undertake work where they would be alone. A few were unable to accept responsibility and to cope with difficulties calling for mental effort. In most cases this phase passed completely within a year"⁽³⁾.

"Some of the prisoners just gazed into space. I thought it was a fight against insanity if you could really keep your mind occupied by having some sort of intellectual activity. You weren't sure what the long-term effect of imprisonment or malnutrition and disease would be. But at least I knew if I was going to survive, I was going to survive as a person, not as a vegetable" (Stanley Warren, POW, 135th Regiment)⁽⁵⁾.

For the first year of the Japanese Occupation, Tan Tock Seng Hospital was used by the Japanese as their medical hospital. In the middle of 1943, it was converted to a civil hospital upon the transfer of civilian patients from the Mental Hospital, which was subsequently used as a hospital for Japanese convalescents. The fate of the mental patients was sealed with the progress of the Japanese Occupation:

"The remaining 1000 patients were placed in a corner of the hospital locked up and neglected. A skeleton nursing service still continued, but the death rate mounted due to the lack of general facilities and malnutrition. In November 1944, about 600 male and female patients were transferred to the Central Mental Hospital, Tanjong Rambutan in Perak by the Japanese and after the war only 329 returned. Nothing much is known about the fate of the remaining patients who did not return"⁽¹⁾.

"About 600 patients came from Woodbridge Hospital, Singapore in November 1944. Officially, the incomplete Administrative Records at Central Mental Hospital (at Tanjong Rambutan in Perak) showed that between 1 January 1942 and 30 September 1945, of the 5,386 patients who were treated, 3,850 died. Initially, most of them died of dysentery partly attributed to eating the only staple food available – rice preserved in slacked lime. Later malnutrition and starvation claimed the remainder. Hardly any treatment was available. In late 1945, only 355 patients witnessed the return of the British. In May 1946, 44 (23 males and 21 females) patients were returned to the Mental Hospital, Singapore (by rail)"⁽⁶⁾.

There was some confusion as to how many mental patients survived the ordeal of the Japanese Occupation and returned to Singapore. In part, this confusion stemmed from the poor record keeping during the chaotic war years.

The trend of suicide in Singapore indicated high rates recorded during the Japanese Occupation. The peak in 1944 was thought to be due to accumulated stresses of war, or despair that the Occupation might not end⁽⁷⁾. The angst of daily struggles took its psychological toll. What was pervasive during this period was the fear, helplessness and hopelessness of those living during the Japanese Occupation. The *Syonan* years were a shattering experience for Singapore families and represented a period of considerable confusion and suffering for the people. Although that era was relatively brief, it was tumultuous and extremely painful.

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