

BOOK REVIEW

Healthcare in The Bahamas

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Only a small proportion of the extensive literature on slavery in the Americas addresses medical care, and only a small proportion of that is related to the Caribbean. And the historiography of healthcare per se in the Caribbean is even more limited. There have been impressive studies of medicine and slavery in the United States of America, where slavery ended more recently than in the former British Caribbean colonies. The magnum opus of the first two hundred years of colonial Caribbean medicine is *Doctors and Slaves – A medical and demographic history of slavery in the British West Indies (1985)* by Richard Sheridan. Other authors, such as Kenneth Kiple, have addressed specific aspects such as infectious diseases in the African diaspora, but there has been less extensive documentation of Caribbean medicine in the post-slavery period, and particularly in the last century, although such studies and writings would be of huge value in the development of modern, comprehensive healthcare for all.

This gap has been splendidly filled for the Commonwealth of The Bahamas by an extensively researched and highly readable new book *Healthcare in The Bahamas – 200 years of Growth and Development*, by Dr Harold Munnings with Virginia Ballance.

Dr Munnings is a pioneering Bahamian gastroenterologist and a passionate medical historian – his second string in a dedicated and successful medical career. His first book, *Princess Margaret Hospital: The Story of a Bahamian Institution*, was stimulated by his family history (and perhaps his very choice of the medical profession as a career is also in part due to this dramatic medical love story). His grandfather, who was a builder, was spiked through his shoe by a rusty nail and contracted severe tetanus. His survival was due to the skilled nursing care he received back in 1920, and he married the nurse who saved his life.

Dr Munnings set out to discover what healthcare was really like in The Bahamas 100 years ago, resulting in the story of the hospital. This in turn stimulated an even greater thirst to research and document the whole history of Bahamian healthcare.

His co-author Virginia Balance is the Nursing and Health Sciences Librarian of the College of The Bahamas and the Managing Editor of the *International Journal of Bahamian Studies*. She has a special interest in the development of nursing education.

Dr Munnings is a true Renaissance man, and the quality of engagement with his subject is heralded by the very cover of the book. It features a splendid painting *Out Island Nurse*, by William McRae Gillies. The artist was a Hollywood movie set designer and magazine illustrator who retired with his wife to Hope Town on Abaco. There he met Nurse Zel Lockhart, a member of the first graduating class to complete the highly regarded four-year training programme for nurses established by government in 1958. It is a most moving painting, and expresses eloquently the challenges faced and the dedication of the Out Island Nurse. The text is over 200 pages, supplemented by appendices, bibliography and an excellent index. After a valuable introduction, the ten chapters take us through the earliest pre-colonial days and the Taino healer the bohuti, the early European settlement until emancipation, health in the Victorian age, health in the 20th century, healthcare in the family islands, the history of the nursing profession, the history of the medical profession, health administration, non-governmental and international organisations, and Bahamian culture and health. It ends with a brief glossary of words and phrases commonly used in Bahamian dialect to describe illnesses and symptoms. This would be of great value to non-Bahamian doctors.

The early chapters are colourful, even exciting reading. The devastating early epidemics of cholera and yellow fever and the endemic typhoid fever, tuberculosis and leprosy throughout the colonial era; and successive epidemics of malaria, dengue and later HIV / AIDS are all well described. But what stands out is the severity of the horrendous challenges faced by those early doctors and nurses, both with the primitive facilities in Nassau and the virtual absence of facilities, human and other resources in the out islands. It is a litany of woes but illustrated with a pantheon of heroes.

Dr Munnings' own story illustrates the role that individual doctors have played in leading medical development. It was a loan from his father that provided the Princess Margaret Hospital with state-of-the-art endoscopic equipment! This kind of initiative has been replicated by many others both in The Bahamas, Barbados and other Caribbean countries, where governments have so often lacked the vision and the wisdom to be guided by the health professionals.

In the modern era, hospital, primary care and public health developments post-independence have made remarkable strides in the Bahamas. The roles of the Pan American Health Organisation and the School of Clinical Medicine and Research of the University of the West Indies are described. In fact, the blossoming of the School of Clinical Medicine and Research has been an outstanding example of partnerships, with a nucleus of University staff working in collaboration with government's staff in the hospital, public and private sectors to produce increasing numbers of Bahamian medical graduates. The school has been blessed with strong leadership, first by Professor Alan Butler, briefly Professor Renn Holness, then Professor Howard Spencer and finally Dr Robin Roberts, and it is truly a success story.

This book should be required reading for every medical student, doctor, nurse and health administrator, and indeed anyone with an interest in health and healthcare in The Bahamas, BUT ALSO across the Caribbean, because we can all learn from these many examples of overcoming challenges. I also hope it will stimulate serious research and documentation of medical problems and healthcare across the Caribbean, even personal memoirs, to tell the stories of healthcare development from the appalling conditions of the colonial era to today, and to help us to make the many advances we still need to make.

Thank you Dr Munnings and Ms Ballance.

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