HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Elihu Yale and the Medicine He Promoted: The Government General Hospital and Madras Medical College, India

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Much has been written about the philanthropist Elihu Yale and his life in the Americas and England, where he spent his beginnings and end. Less publicized is his life in India, where he spent the majority of his adult life and where he raised his family. A major contribution of Elihu Yale to medicine in India was his promotion of a local hospital in the major Indian trading port city of Madras. This essay briefly describes the history of that hospital and the medical college that grew out of it.

Elihu Yale was a 24-year-old clerk in Boston when he was recruited by the British East India Company to go to India (circa 1672). America was a colony of England, and a route to India was established for trade. French and Spanish fleets were vying for control of trade ports in coastal cities of India. One such coastal city was Madras, in the southern part of India along the Bay of Bengal. Eli Yale was recruited as a writer for the East India Company, and when he arrived in India, he led his life among English merchants, administrators, army generals, and the British-appointed Governor inside Fort St. George in Madras (Figure 1) [1].

Yale was considered to be very talented, and he ascended the bureaucratic ladder very swiftly, being promoted to Governor within 15 years of his arrival. As Governor (1687–1692) he had many daunting responsibilities, one of which was to see to the health care of English families, British soldiers, and merchant traders who were defending the Fort from French incursions. The French had established a port in neighboring Pondicherry, south of Madras. The ongoing
Anglo-French skirmishes resulted in a steady stream of casualties and injuries.

Elihu Yale was an Anglican Catholic (Church of England) who lived in this Fort where he also promoted the Church of St. Mary. A metal plaque (no doubt of recent origin) outside the church boasts that this was the first Anglican Catholic church built east of the Suez (Figure 2). No evidence however exists to support this contention, and historians dispute this assertion. The first marriage conducted in this church was that of Elihu Yale and Catherine Hynners (widow of his friend Joseph Hynners) on November 4, 1680, the bride being given away by Governor Streynsham Master. The church and its museum still maintain original and handwritten copies of the register on display. The first line in the marriage register is that of Elihu Yale. One of the first baptisms was also that of a Yale; David Yale was born and baptized in this church. Little David Yale, however, died at age of four and his tombstone lies within the present day Madras Law College campus within a mile of the fort.

Yale’s connection to this church has been memorialized by the efforts of a former U.S. Consul-General in Madras, Chester Bowles, later a United States Ambassador to India and also a Yale University Alumnus.

He visited the church that probably was in shambles and solicited friends and alumni for contributions that helped in preserving this monument. A marble inscription within the church documents this event and even carries the University’s motto: “Lux et Veritas” (Figure 3). Elihu Yale’s portrait done at the Fort was requested by the University and, with special permission, was transported from the museum to the University.

At the time, Yale was Governor of the Madras Presidency (province), the only available medical facility (in the western sense) was a small army barrack adjacent to St. Mary’s church. This hospital was established in 1664, the first such facility in all of India. This hospital was in a Cogan-owned house and had been rented for medical care by Governor Edward Winter. Between 1679 and 1688, possibly under recommendations from Yale (who was not yet Governor), 838 pagodas were raised (currency that then existed in India, valued at 3,000 rupees, equivalent to approximately $60 at current exchange rates). These funds were mostly from public subscription among the colonial families living within the confines of the fort. This subscription allowed construction of a two-story hospital near the church. The hospital was tended to by the church staff and vestry. Soon after Yale was appointed Governor, his Governor’s Council acquired this hospital and then they built a larger, new hospital near the north end of the barracks. Located in James street, it was constructed in the Tuscan style, and this hospital was valued at 2,500 pagodas (9,000 rupees), a considerable cost at that time (Figure 4) [1].

Subsequent to Yale’s governorship, between 1700 and 1749, the British and French troops and navy fought heavily for occupancy of the fort. The French succeeded in conquering the fort for a few years and intermittently were invaded by the companies and British soldiers who were vigorous in taking control of the southern capital of the India that they wanted to dominate as a trade center. In
1749, the French were finally ousted, but this half-century of bitter sea and land battles resulted in many sick and mutilated soldiers, some needing amputations and some needing terminal care.

Intermittently, the hospital established by Elihu Yale’s Governor’s Council was moved in and out of the fort. The final home of the hospital was built just west of the fort and this became the focus from which developed a great center where medicine and health care thrived and grew (Figure 4).

For most of its early years, almost for a century, the hospital established by Yale’s Council tended to sick soldiers and colonial occupants of the fort (about 180 families). During the period 1753 to 1772 there were many more moves until a true hospital for the public — a “General Hospital” — was built under the Governorship of Patrick Ross. A medalion is found in the hospital wall, currently in a location just opposite to medical school Dean’s office. It says “Hospital founded 1753,” which rather confuses the dateline; it is most likely that this medalion was relocated from one of the older buildings of the hospital complex.

The General Hospital was later developed into a teaching institution, mostly, however, for colonial white settlers who chose the profession of medicine. The medical college, founded in 1835, was the second oldest in India, perhaps even in the entire Eastern hemisphere, which tutored contemporary western medicine. Modern surgery, obstetrics, and medicine were practiced by the physicians who taught and lived there. Among the splendid buildings still in existence within the medical school campus are two worthy of mention: a red building that houses the anatomy hall where current first-year medical students spend 50 to 60 percent of their learning time. Cadavers ready for dissection adorn the second-floor dissection hallway. This hall of anatomy is aptly termed “the Red Fort,” for the student who survives the rigors of learning within the Red Fort seem certain to survive the remaining years of a medical education. The second building, with tall pillars, faces east and houses an auditorium; it is reputed to be the oldest building (built in 1835) still surviving within the campus.

Another highlight of the hospital’s history relates to the education of women physicians. By the mid-nineteenth century no women physician had ever graduated from an English medical school and the medical schools in India followed this discriminatory, gender-biased tradition. Mary Ann Dalcombe Scharlieb [1, 2] was married to an English lawyer who practiced in India. She came to Madras in 1865 and was able to persuade some of the faculty of Madras Medical College to accept her
into medical school to undertake the rigors of medical education and the discrimination of the male-dominated profession.

Coinciding with her interests was the great need for female physicians among the local population, who at the time had very high maternal mortality and morbidity: Many would have rather died than let male physicians deliver their babies. Mary Scharlieb graduated from Madras Medical College in 1878 and was able to continue with her higher studies at Royal London School of Medicine before returning to Madras.

One of the famous stories that current medical students at MMC learn is about Scharlieb’s instruction in obstetrics: Dr. Branfoot at the Women’s and Children’s hospital in Madras, who was “not used” to female medical students, supposedly told her, “I cannot prevent you walking round the wards, but I will not teach you.” Like Elizabeth Blackwell of the State University of New York, Syracuse, the first woman medical graduate in North America, Scharlieb became an icon in the history of women in medicine who walked the wards of Government General Hospital. Scharlieb was made a Dame of the Empire in 1926.

Madras, since renamed Chennai, a large and important Indian city, is home to four medical schools. The oldest, Madras Medical College, continues to thrive as one of the finest institution in India, founded on the hospital built over three centuries ago under the guidance and inspiration of Elihu Yale.

The authors recommend that readers visit Madras, if they happen to visit India. They are especially encouraged to visit the Medical School and Government General Hospital for which the University’s benefactor provided the nucleus. Travelers through the city of Madras in the state of Oregon, United States, can also remember its indirect Yale connection, since the town was named after the cali-cloth exported from Madras around two centuries ago.

REFERENCES
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