# Hospitals of Yore: A Brief Historical Review of Hospitals in the Early Ages, Early Christian Era and Europe

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**ABSTRACT** History of hospitals is both, intriguing and remarkable. Earliest hospitals, located in Egypt, Greece and Rome were temples dedicated to Gods. Treatment in these temples was more or less ritualistic, intended to propitiate Gods and seek their blessings. With the advent of Christianity, the concept of social welfare gained ground. Church and clergy established institutions to house the poor, the elderly and the sick. Early European hospitals were appendages of monasteries and laid a greater emphasis on healing the soul. Later on, European noblemen built the hospitals as charitable institutions. After the French revolution, hospitals became secular and voluntary institutions funded by private donations. By nineteenth century state-run hospitals became de rigueur. With progress in medical science, European public hospitals became pioneers in the field of medical research and education.

Metamorphosis of a hospital as an institution is quite remarkable; it is quite unlike the transformation of any other institution. Their development from places of charity for the poor and diseased into monuments exemplifying the modern scientific achievements has completely altered their character and purpose. The distinct nature of hospitals as social institutions, which emerged from the fringes of society, catering only to the underprivileged, to becoming an integral part of the modern life and serving people from every conceivable background has significantly elevated their social role and prestige. In the contemporary times it is difficult to imagine a city or a town without hospitals.

**ETYMOLOGY:**
The word 'hospital' has an interesting provenance. It could have been derived from the old French word *ospital,* equivalent to modern *hôpital,* which meant a place for the needy. However, it seems, 'hospital' had a Latin predecessor – *hospitāle* – meaning a 'guesthouse'. All these confusing words had another, even more ancient ancestor, *hospes* meaning 'guest'. [1] Over the centuries the term hospital was used to describe a place, which was a guesthouse, a temple for prayer and healing, a home for the needy and homeless, an almshouse to dole out charities, a home for the sick and terminally ill and an institute to treat illness.

**EARLY AGES**
Disease is as old as the human consciousness. Every civilization, in every age, has tried to counter disease in its own unique way. In the ancient cultures, religion and medicine were inseparable. Hospital-like institutions in the ancient world sprang up in different parts of the globe: most notably in Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, India, China and Japan.

The earliest known institutions serving the sick and diseased were found in Egypt. Temples of ancient Egypt - dedicated to gods and goddesses of different diseases – were places for the study and practice of medicine. Imhotep, the vizier of Pharaoh Djoser (IIIrd Dynasty), is credited with the creation of Egyptian medical science in 2500 BC. [2] He popularized the cult of 'incubation' – the practice of sleeping in temples or sacred places for oracular purposes. [3] He was later identified by Greeks as the deity Asclepius. [2]

Asclepius was the Greek God of healing. Temples dedicated to him – called the Asclepieia – were places for prayer, medical advice, prognosis and treatment. In the ancient Greek culture sleeping in sacred places, dreaming and dream interpretation were the means to decipher super-natural cures. These divine prescriptions were closely linked to the medical practices and folk healing prevalent in those days. An Asclepion - with its imposing architecture, proximity to natural springs, a retinue of staff and religious ceremonies – provided a carefully controlled environment to promote physical and spiritual recovery of the visitors. [3]

Roman Valetudinaria, popularized during the reign of emperor Augus-

tus, were meant to treat sick and injured Roman soldiers and slaves. On the battlefield, after completing the triage process, soldiers were dispatched to a *valetudinarium,* which provided the requisite facilities, trained staff and rituals for the complete physical and spiritual healing of the inmates. Medical care mainly focused on managing wounds, broken limbs and acute illnesses.  A spa-like atmosphere prevailed in these ancient healing institutions where inmates were encouraged to pray, bathe, sing, sleep, and attend theatrical functions and sport spectacles. [3]

King Pandukabhaya  of Sri Lanka, who reigned in the fourth century BC (from 437BC to 367BC) built hospitals throughout the country. The state was responsible for building and up-keep of these earliest healthcare institutions. These hospitals catered to the entire population regardless of their status and position. King Dutugemunu (second century BC), continuing the old tradition established general and specialized facilities for cripples, the blind, and for treatment of infectious diseases. The first maternity home was opened for the public during the reign of Upatissa II in the sixth century AD. [4] [5]

Free clinics for the sick were established in China during ancient times. Alms houses for crippled, deaf, mute and insane existed in China as far back as 300 BC. [6] Shitennoh-ji, a Buddhist temple, built by Prince Shotoku in 593 AD at Osaka, Japan, had a teaching hospital, orphanage and almshouse attached to it. In the 8th century AD - i.e. the Nara Era - Buddhist temples called Kokubun-ji with attached hospitals and almshouses were established in each province. Doctors were educated in the city of Nara before being dispatched to different provinces. [6] [7]

**Early Christian Hospitals**
Jesus of Nazareth's suffering during his turbulent life became a driving force for the early Christians to work for the dispossessed. Christianity adopted the social welfare model of ancient Egyptian and Jews, which specifically targeted the marginalized communities such as poor, sick and aged. [3]

Emperor Constantine (280 AD to 337 AD) – the first Roman emperor to adopt Christianity – was considered Christ's representative on Earth and source of all authority. He had an obligation to work for the welfare of his subjects. He abolished all pagan hospitals and made a fresh start. [3]

St. Basil the great (330 AD – 379 AD) laid emphasis on doing good to fulfill his duty as a devout Christian. [3] He established a religious foundation in Cappadocia (in the Asia Minor or present day Turkey) that included a hospital, an isolation unit for those suffering from leprosy, and buildings to house the poor, the elderly, and the sick. [8] By 340 AD, the church of Antioch (modern day Turkish city of Antakya) under the leadership of Bishop Leontios began to operate a number of hostels - xenodocheia or xenones as they were called - to feed and shelter the poor. [3]

Shrines dedicated to Christian martyrs in the ancient city of Edessa (also located in Turkey) were famous for their healing powers. Rabbula (411 AD – 435 AD), the Bishop of Edessa founded an institution devoted to the sick and terminally ill called nosokomeion or the sickhouse with separate facilities for men and women. Attending physicians actively engaged in providing care. [3]

**Hospitals in Europe**
Religion was the major driving force in building the early hospitals in Europe. Monastic orders grew rapidly from fifth and sixth centuries to the Middle Ages. [9] These early monastic institutions were ecclesiastical and not medical in nature; they laid greater emphasis on healing the soul than tending to the bodily ailments and were a far cry from the rational non-religious approach, which characterized the Greek medicine of Hippocrates.

Bishop Landry founded the Hôtel-Dieu of Paris in 660 AD. [8] This hospital had among its staff attending physicians and surgeons. By the year 1300, hospital catered to around 900 patients, however, its capacity was doubled in the fifteenth century. It is amazing to note that the hospital is still operational.

The Crusades, which began at the end of 11th century provided a major fillip to the growth of hospitals all over Europe. The order of St. John, in 1099, established one of the first specialized hospitals in Jerusalem, which catered to about 2000 patients - especially those suffering from eye diseases. This order is actively involved in caring for the sick and needy till today. [8]

Until the twelfth century, most hospitals were small and built as refuges for sick poor people who were admitted for shelter and basic nursing care and were also a means of isolating those with infectious diseases. The Christian ideal of healing the sick and giving alms to the poor motivated the foundation of many early hospitals, and philanthropists (then as now) sponsored hospitals as an act of charity, in some cases to buy grace in heaven or to demonstrate their wealth and social position. [10]

Rahere – a jester or minstrel and favourite courtier of King Henry I of England – founded the Priory Church of St. Bartholomew the Great in 1123 with an accompanying hospital. King Henry VIII, in 1546-1547, after disbanding the monasteries, granted the hospital to the Corporation of London and endowed it with properties and income entitlements. It was here that William Harvey – who was a physician at the hospital for thirty four years - conducted his research on the circulatory system in the 17th century, Percivall Pott and John Abernethy developed important principles of modern surgery in the 18th century, and Mrs Bedford Fenwick worked to advance the nursing profession in the late 19th century. The hospital is well known as Barts Hospital.[11] [12]

Folco Portinari –an Italian banker – who donated a large part of his fortune to the hospital founded Florentine hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in 1288. It was a rich institution, both financially and artistically. The hospital had separate wards for males and females accommodating about two hundred patients. Prestige of the hospital was such that Pope Martin V visited it in 1419. This hospital is still in existence. [13]

A large-scale building of hospitals occurred in the thirteenth century. Hospitals acquired a recognizable medical character in the sixteenth century but the public continued to consider them a place for the sick, insane and elderly poor, where they could rot in peace. A hospital was 'a place, not to live, but to die'. [10]

Nicholas Rolin, the Chancellor of Burgundy, and his wife Guigone Salins founded hospices Civils de Baune or Hôtel-Dieu de Baune in 1443 to provide succor to the populace ravaged by the Hundred Years War fought between France and England. The hospital began operations on 1st of January 1452 and welcomed the sick, elderly, disabled, orphans, destitute and the women about to give birth. The hospital, over the years, received generous donations from the nobles and rich, which helped to expand and beautify the hospital by addition of many facilities and pieces of art. It thus became a 'palace for the poor'. It ceased operations in 1971 when the medical facility was shifted to a modern building; the old building now houses a museum. [6] [14]

Duke of Milan, Francisco Sforza commissioned the building of a grand hospital in 1456. Ospedale Maggiore was one of the largest buildings and the largest hospital built during the Renaissance. Its architect Antonio Averlino, better known as Filarete ("lover of virtue") combined the ideals of functionality and epidemiology in his plan. He endeavoured to create an environment that would prevent the spread of infection and promote recovery. He created an efficient sewer system to prevent noxious air from spreading the disease, keeping in mind the widely held belief that corruption of air caused infectious diseases. [15]

An increased spurt in the hospital construction during seventeenth century coincided with rapid urbanization. French revolution accelerated the secularization of hospitals. Voluntary, non-religious hospitals were established with private donations. [10] In the nineteenth century, state and voluntary hospitals began to care for the sick and poor in the rapidly expanding cities. With medical progress, hospitals became 'medicalized' in the sense that admission was determined according to medical rather than social criteria, and by physicians instead of hospital benefactors. By the end of the nineteenth century, all large European cities had both public and private general hospitals. Public hospitals became the sites for most teaching and research, typically being visited by clinicians for several hours each week. [16]

As the role of the hospital expanded, so did the need for public support. Most European hospitals came under some form of state control in the twentieth century, since philanthropy and patient fees were no longer sufficient to cover the huge rise in costs of treatment. [10]

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