Togoba Hansenide Colony, Papua New Guinea

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Togoba Hansenide Colony was opened in 1950 in order to treat cases of leprosy or Hansen’s disease in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Over the years its patronage has decreased, as the incidence of leprosy has almost disappeared from the region.

Preparations

Following World War II the government administrators of the Mandated Territory of New Guinea negotiated with the Seventh-day Adventist church leaders of the Coral Sea Union Mission (CSUM) to establish a facility to treat leprosy sufferers.¹ It was agreed that the government would supply operating funds, including medical supplies, and the
church would be responsible for its construction, staffing, and day-to-day management.

Ward Nolan, president of the North-east New Guinea Mission, chose a site of 340 hectares (840 acres) near Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands and a team of local tribesmen cleared the ground, planted food crops, and built some rudimentary huts of native materials. The area was called Togoba. Len Barnard and his family arrived on June 10, 1949, to establish the hospital. Barnard had wartime experience in the army hospital conducted by the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) at Lae. After the war he had further experience in charge of the Madang Native Hospital and a hospital for lepers at Bogia. A month after Barnard arrived, Frank Aveling started the building of a sawmill and the hauling of logs across rivers and over mountains to stockpile timber for permanent dwellings.

First Years

After nine months of preparation Barnard opened the permanent hospital in March 1950. It was originally titled the New Guinea Highlands Leprosy Hospital. Two months after the official opening two nursing sisters, Olive and Elsie Pearce, arrived from New Zealand to care for the patients. Olive had experience in laboratory work and was able to use her skills to detect the organism *Mycobacterium leprae*, or Hansen’s bacillus. The common treatment was doses of the antibiotic diaminodiphenylsulfone, or dapsone, supplied by the government. By early 1952 admissions totaled 376 patients, and 164 of these had been discharged as individuals who could return to their village with self-medication or continue as low-risk outpatients. Three years later the tally had risen to 850 patients admitted and 400 discharged.

Inevitably, other medical cases presented at the hospital. Malaria, pneumonia, wounds, and ulcers were treated in general wards away from the leprosy patients. The entire enterprise was conducted along the lines of a regular SDA mission station with daily worship and special Sabbath services. One of the leprosy patients, Kai, adopted the role of interpreter and when he was discharged he established a church community in his own village.

Soon after, when the World Health Organization renamed leprosy Hansen’s disease, the establishment became known as the New Guinea Highlands Hansenide Colony. It was functioning with a bed capacity of 350. Most Australasian nurses served a three-year term before replacement. Gwen Long and Esther Petherbridge were serving in 1954.

In Its Prime

By 1955 the search for a fully qualified medical doctor resulted in Dr. Roy Yeatts agreeing to transfer from America to build on the sound foundation that Barnard had laid. Initially he was placed in charge of the hospital at Togoba in addition to a second leprosy colony that the SDA mission adopted near Bogia, a unit named Hatzfeldhaven Hansenide Colony. Nurses Florence Burdett, June Rogers, and Len Doble arrived to assist Yeatts at Togoba.

Under Yeatts the bed capacity was extended to five hundred. Replacement nurses in 1960 were Olive Fisher, Arlie McDougall, Dorothy Piper, and Lance Waddington. The name of the institution was changed to Mount Hagen Hansenide Colony.

Diminishing Need

By the time Yeatts left in 1961, early detection of the disease had improved to such an extent that severe cases requiring amputations were uncommon. Trained nurses could do the required care. The bed capacity was reduced to four hundred, and nurse Waddington was put in charge followed by physiotherapist Earle Hokin. During the 1960s the nursing assistants who came and went were Ruth Colwill, Mary Neil, Robert Wood, Beth Minchow, Noreen Sandy, Barbara Jakes, Ann Hall, Hazel Jakes, and Lydia Pinchin.

The name of the institution was changed to Togoba Hansenide Colony in 1969, and Dr. Ken Robson served a three-year term as medical officer in charge. The number of nursing staff and bed capacity was gradually reduced, until in 1978 the institution was listed as the Togoba Rural Health Centre, with 113 beds. With a general hospital now (2015) established by the government at Mount Hagen, there is need for only a small medical facility at Togoba. It functions chiefly as a dispensing clinic.

Sources


“Mount Hagen, in the Central Highlands . . .” *Australasian Record*, June 6, 1949.


NOTES

1. “Mount Hagen, in the Central Highlands . . .,” *Australasian Record*, June 6, 1949, 8.


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


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