

# River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital

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River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital is a medical missionary institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church located in the Argentina Union Conference. Its headquarters is located at 25 de Mayo 255, ZIP code: 3103, Libertador San Martín, in the Entre Ríos district, Argentina.<sup>1</sup>

River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital (Sanatorio Adventista del Plata or SAP) is a health institution targeting medical and hospital services. It was the first, and for many years, the only Adventist medical institution in South America.<sup>2</sup> Since 1908, the Sanitarium is part of the Adventist clinics and hospitals network, a health system that currently has more than 500 units all over the world.<sup>3</sup> The Sanitarium has been active in preventive rehab medicine and in human health education. Thus, the Sanitarium stands out for excellence in providing assistance that employs the usage of the best teams and the latest scientific discoveries. It is also led by principles such as trust in God and respect for others.

In its public service, the institution provides the following specialties: allergy, anatomical pathology, anesthesia, clinical cardiology, cardio surgery, smoking cessation, health clinic, surgery, dermatology, endocrinology, endoscopy, physical medicine and rehabilitation, pharmacy, phonoaudiology, gastroenterology, gerontology, gynecology, hematology, hemodynamics, hemodialysis, hepatology, hemotherapy, infectious disease, kinesiology, nephrology, neonatology, neurology, neurosurgery, pulmonology, nutrition, midwifery, dentistry, ophthalmology, oncology, otorhinolaryngology, pediatrics, psychiatry, psychology, radiology, rheumatology, intensive care, traumatology and orthopaedics, urology, and lithotripsy.<sup>4</sup>

## Developments that Led to the Institution's Establishment

Adventism started in South America through publications that had been sent there halfway through the 1880s. The first missionaries to arrive in these South American lands in 1891 were canvassers Elwin Snyder, Clair Nowlen, and Albert Stauffer,<sup>5</sup> who were able to inspire Lionel Brooking – one of the first persons who accepted Adventist beliefs on health issues.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, the self-supporting missionaries arrival in 1890, the canvassers arrival in 1891, and the first ordained pastor arrival in 1894 all enabled God's Word and the health message to influence the lives of those who came to know it. Thus, they officially organized a few churches and started small educational, health, publishing house, and healthy food factory institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1895, a Norwegian nurse and masseur, Ole Oppegard, arrived on Argentine soil to work as a canvasser.<sup>8</sup> Oppegard was the first to offer health treatments and to share healthy eating principles. He was assisted in this task by Lucy Post<sup>9</sup> and other missionaries who arrived in Buenos Aires at that time. All of them highlighted the importance of preventive medicine through healthy eating and good hygiene concepts. Thus, the need arose to start a medical institution.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in the following year, Pastor Nelson Z. Town asked the General Conference (GC) Board of Missionaries to send doctors and missionaries. Frank H. Westphal also shared that desire when he filed a request for the GC in 1897 for an Adventist Sanitarium to be established in Argentina. Pastors Arthur G. Daniells and William A. Spicer, faced with this request and representing the board, proposed to Dr. Habenicht by letter that he ought to take on this task as a missionary doctor.<sup>11</sup>

Around that time, Argentina was part of the so-called South American West Coast Mission (1894-1900) along with Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, all under the direction of the GC Foreign Missions Board. In 1901, it was part of the South American Union Mission by GC decision under the name of the Argentina Mission. In 1906, that organized field was renamed River Plate Conference, becoming part of the South American Union Mission. A decade later, River Plate Conference remained within the Austral Union Conference (currently the Argentina Union Conference) which, at the time was comprised of Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay under the newly organized South American Division.<sup>12</sup>

Pastor and doctor Robert H. Habenicht (1866-1925), officially sent by the Seventh-day Adventist Church Mission Board, arrived on December 2, 1901. He was originally from the United States and was accompanied by his children and his wife Adella Ida Allen, who had also completed medical training courses.<sup>13</sup> His arrival in Buenos Aires allowed him to take the first steps towards the establishment of the Adventist Sanitarium.<sup>14</sup> Before arriving in Argentina, Habenicht had already established some clinics and a sanitarium in Iowa. From the beginning of this project, the South American Union president, Pastor Joseph W. Westphal (1861-1949), was greatly enthusiastic about it and was a powerful supporter of the project.<sup>15</sup>

Once in the country, he faced great opposition from local doctors, who apparently felt professionally threatened. This situation led him to meet with the British proconsul and the Crespo health authorities to obtain a provisional authorization. Upon receiving this authorization, he was asked "to take all medical subjects in Spanish,"<sup>16</sup> and have them undergo rigorous examinations so he could legally practice medicine in the country. Thus, on March 1, 1902, Dr. Habenicht, with the help of Lionel Brooking, opened the first medical clinic,<sup>17</sup> which happened to function in his own house, and one of his rooms served both as an office and a surgical center. The first patient to be treated there was the town commissioner.<sup>18</sup> At the time, Habenicht, while caring for the sick, tried to obtain the approval of his medical degree, taking his proficiency exam in the city of Paraná, the capital of the province of Entre Ríos. This title enabled him to practice medicine where there was no doctor with a national title. Dr. Habenicht's patients grew in number every day, and the idea of establishing a sanitarium was strengthened by Church leaders, the Adventist brotherhood, and the general public.

## The Institution's Establishment

On October 22, 1907, at the annual assembly held in the city of Gualeguay, Entre Ríos province, the establishment of a "small Sanitarium connected to the school of Camarero" [currently the Adventist University of Plata] was voted on and approved. On that occasion, Habenicht made a donation that added 10 percent of the total value of the budget planned for the construction of the health center and equipment. In March 1908, the council of the South American Union took place in Camarero school, where the decision to buy Dr. R. H. Habenicht's house was made. The house, with 25 hectares of land next to the school, was to be the Adventist Sanitarium of Plata.

The committee in charge of the project consisted of José W. Wetphal, Nelson Z. Town, Jorge Lust, and Jorge Riffel. The official inauguration took place on November 15, 1908<sup>19</sup> when the River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital officially began operating as a recognized and accredited institution, becoming the first Adventist medical institution in South America.<sup>20</sup> Since its inception, the Sanitarium came to meet the enormous healthcare needs in the town, so much so that 30 to 40 people were being treated daily.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Sanitarium's first building was 24 by 11 square meters and occupied the entire first floor. The construction began in 1909, but it would not be ready until eight years later.

## History of the Institution

The institution was always called River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital. Its address for the first two decades was at Estación Puiggari, Distrito Palmar, Departamento Diamante, Entre Ríos, Argentina. But due to urban growth and development, its current address is 25 de Mayo no. 255, Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, Argentina. Since its early days, the institution has been recognized for promoting Christian care without discrimination. The first official patient in the Sanitarium's history was General Eduardo Racedo, who had been the Entre Ríos province governor.<sup>22</sup>

Another important event was the arrival of the American doctor Abel Landers Gregory, who was in Brazil to help in with the Sanitarium. Robert H. Habenicht himself was the founder and first director of the institution (1908 to 1923).<sup>23</sup> Future directors all worked tirelessly for the health institution's development.<sup>24</sup> Dr. George B. Replogle, a graduate of the University of Arkansas School of Medicine, joined the SAP in 1912.<sup>25</sup>

In that same year, working in parallel with the healthcare institution, Habenicht started a nursing school, and the first nurses graduated from it in 1912. Carlos Westphal, a graduate of medicine in Chile, joined the Sanitarium in 1920 as well as H.E. Herman. Robert H. Habenicht left the management in 1923 after 22 years of work at the institution, followed by Carlos E. Westphal. In the early years, there was a shortage of Adventist doctors with national titles but, on the other hand, there were some patients who decided to be baptized as a result of the medical missionary work.<sup>26</sup>

As time went by, the River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital grew in number of personnel and available beds. In 1916, 35 people worked at the Sanitarium. In 1920, there were 20 beds, and in 1925, it had increased to 60 beds. The 1920s and 1930s were marked by financial difficulties due to the post-war era and the Great Depression.<sup>27</sup> Due to these circumstances, in 1930, there were only 45 people on staff. In that same year, 141 nurses from almost all the countries of the South American Division graduated from the institution. Almost all SAD Adventist nurses graduated during this initial period in the Sanitarium. In 1950, two South America doctors who had graduated with their degrees joined the Sanitarium: Marcelo Hammerly and Arnaldo Block. Later, in the mid-1970s, the Sanitarium advocated the creation of a church on the premises of the institution, later called Iglesia del Parque. The temple building with a capacity for 400 people in attendance was inaugurated on May 15, 1982. From 1950 to 1980, the capacity of beds expanded from 50 to 186, and the number of doctors increased from 4 to 35.<sup>28</sup>

This Adventist institution also administered the Northwest Argentine Adventist Sanitarium (SANA), located in Villa Libertad in the city of Leandro N. Alem, Misiones province, Argentina, which has 26 beds.<sup>29</sup> For some years, it also had external offices in the cities of Paraná and Concordia, Entre Ríos, Argentina. SAP also has 50 small support groups<sup>30</sup> related to the departments of the institution, each giving assistance to the employees. Adventist SAP staff mostly attend churches in the town of Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos; Barrio América, Central, Camarero, Norte, Parque and of the River Plate Adventist University. In addition, they collaborate with the congregations of Puiggari, Crespo Norte, Diamante Sur, and Norte, all in the Entre Ríos Province.

In the last few years, there has been an important refurbishment completed in the building, which was carried out in stages. This provided greater operational capacity and greater comfort for both patients and staff. The River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital now has 626 employees and 54 workers. Of these, six are pastors, five of them authorized and one licensed. The number of doctors is now 140, in addition to 60 residents and 145 nurses. Currently, SAP reaches patients from all regions of the country and even from abroad. Today, it has 100 beds in the healthcare area, and in the sector called the Healthy Living Center, there are 65 beds. The geriatric care unit has 23 beds. The institution offers 40 medical specialties and subspecialties, some of them not offered in any other place in the province of Entre Ríos.<sup>31</sup> SAP also acts as a leader in the prevention of diseases through education and the application of natural remedies.

## Historic Role of the Institution

The River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital has established a strong legacy of missionary service since Dr. Robert Habenicht's time. SAP professionals, together with leaders of the SDA Church, travel to different places on weekends to offer medical, dental, and nursing care to needy communities. In addition, free courses and seminars are offered, held throughout the year, accompanied by the distribution of Christian publications and Bibles. Moreover, the Sanitarium promotes a "How to stop smoking" course and, at the end of the year, the

stress control course is held in Tierra del Fuego.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout its history, it has dedicated financial and human resources so that its professionals can offer free seminars and conferences on health. The Adventist Center for Healthy Living, attached to the Sanitarium, has offered a comprehensive proposal for physical, mental, social, and spiritual health since 1983, serving as the pioneer in this area for the region.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the Sanitarium enjoys excellent interaction with the community and its authorities as it fulfils its role in prevention, education, and healing as well as promoting a healthier society.<sup>34</sup> Currently, the adaptation and extension project of the building is ongoing, with the construction of an office area for Ophthalmology and Dentistry and the extension of the basement that is intended to accommodate a new meeting room with a capacity to hold 200 people.<sup>35</sup> These goals are directed to enhance the development of healthy habits, the promotion of healing and rehabilitation, and ultimately increase the good health of its patients. Thus, it seeks to satisfy each patient, his or her family, and the community surrounding the institution.<sup>36</sup>

## Mission

SAP is located near the River Plate Adventist University in the Entre Ríos province. It is also 60 km from the city of Paraná and 450 km from Buenos Aires. SAP had been operating for 110 years in 2018.<sup>37</sup> Based on fundamental Christian principles, the objective of the institution since its foundation was and will continue to be to promote care and healing, opening the door to the gospel of salvation.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, its staff is formed by excellent professionals trained in the best universities in the country and abroad.

## Leaders Lists<sup>39</sup>

General Directors: Robert H. Habenicht (1908-1923);<sup>40</sup> Carlos Edgardo Westphal (1923-1954); Marcelo Alberto Hammerly (1954-1967); Pedro Daniel Tabuenca (1968-1978); Hiram Darío Rostán (1978-1986); Gunnar Wensell (1986-1998); Haroldo Cecotto (1999-2010); Kenny Vicente Senn (2011-2015); Arnoldo Miguel Kalbermatter (2016-current).<sup>41</sup>

Medical Directors: Robert H. Habenicht (1908-1923); Carlos Edgardo Westphal (1923-1954); Marcelo Alberto Hammerly (1954-1967); Pedro Daniel Tabuenca (1968-1978); Hiram Darío Rostán (1978-1986); Rubén Rostán (1986-1988); Herald Mangold (1989-1993); Fernando Cabrini (1994-1995); Donaldo Sicalo (1996-1997); Eduardo Treyer (1998); Rolando Gnass (1999-2003); Enrique Stoletniy (2004-2010); Arnoldo Kalbermatter (2011-2015); Haroldo Steger (2016-current).

Administrative Directors: George Replogle (1911-1915); Orestes Maxson (1916-1936); Ner Soto (1936-1947); Alfredo Bellido (1947-1950); Pedro Brouchy (1950-1954); Romualdo Kalbermatter (1954-1965); Emilio Bietz (1965-1967); Daniel Nestares (1968-1971); Norberto Castro (1971-1978); Edwin Mayer (1978-1980); Tito

Rodríguez (1980-1986); Ricardo Cardinali (1986-1998); Jorge De la Rosa (1998-2000); Armando Casarramona (2001-2013); Arnoldo Schlemper (2013-current).<sup>42</sup>

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