



Nokuphila Hospital showing inside a ward.

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## Nokuphila Mission Hospital (1936–1959)

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Nokuphila Mission Hospital was a medical institution of the Southern African Division of Seventh-day Adventists from 1936 to 1959.

### Developments That Led to the Establishment of the Institution

From the disposal of the Cape Sanitarium by the African Division in 1925, there lingered a desire to establish a major hospital that would cater to the medical needs of the Blacks in South Africa. The desired ideal by the Division in Africa was that each union mission should directly or indirectly have a training school and a major hospital.<sup>1</sup> For the North Bantu Mission Field, this was to be realized through the establishment of Nokuphila Hospital that received its first patient in August 1936 under the directorship of Dr. A. N. Tonge and Miss A. Visser as matron.<sup>2</sup>

The official opening ceremony was held on Wednesday, October 14, 1936, as a response to the many requests extended by the Blacks who worked around the Rand gold mines in Johannesburg. In 1936 the city of Johannesburg was also celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. The word Nokuphila in Sesoto, isiZulu and isiXhosa languages mean “the mother of health.” This name was chosen after consulting the counsel of the professor of native languages of the Witwatersrand University.<sup>3</sup>

When Elder I. H. Evans, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, visited South Africa, the matter was given earnest study by the Southern African Division. The division built the hospital among thousands of Blacks that worked in and around the Rand gold mines in Johannesburg on a leased land comprising two stands (A.295 and A.297) on Dowling Avenue Extension in the Western Native Township, west of Johannesburg.<sup>4</sup> Construction funds came from the Harvest Ingathering funds (£2,000) of 1935, the 13<sup>th</sup> Sabbath School Offering overflow (£600), and a bequest from a Ms. Thompson of Johannesburg (£750). The hospital also received a small appropriation from the Department of Native Affairs in 1940.<sup>5</sup>

## Founding of the Hospital

The construction work was done by D. Rusticus, who on the opening day presented the silver key to the chief native commissioner, B. W. Martin who then declared the building open.<sup>6</sup> Other officials present at the occasion were G. Ballenden, manager of the Native Affairs Department in Johannesburg; A. F. Tarr, who chaired the institution’s opening program; and Elder J. F. Wright, president of the Southern African Division. It started with the capacity of 20 beds, of which an average of seventeen beds were occupied each day during the year. Dr. A. N. Tonge was the medical director of the institution, assisted by Dr. Josephine Davies.<sup>7</sup> Miss A. Visser was the acting matron.

Previously it had been felt that the medical work was one of the weakest links in the church’s missionary work in South Africa, and therefore it was hoped that this new hospital would strengthen the missionary work and that its effect would be far reaching. The hospital treated general diseases among men, women, and children and did many surgeries. Right from its first day of opening, the hospital was filled to capacity.<sup>8</sup> During the first year of its operation, 529 patients were cared for, and of this number, 98 were major surgical procedures, 238 minor surgical procedures, and 193 were medical cases.<sup>9</sup> Already, the work of the hospital was being appreciated by

the municipal and government officials, as well as the public at large. It afforded the public to see what hospitals, supported by their Harvest Ingathering gifts, were doing.

## History of the Institution

The establishment of Nokuphila Hospital led to the scaling down of the medical work at Emmanuel Mission and at Cancele to dispensary levels, in line with the advice given by Dr. Ferguson, Principal Medical Officer for the Transkei.<sup>10</sup> In 1938 a training school for African nurses was opened, and it received the South African Medical Council recognition. Student nurses were to take the same state examinations as did other nurses training at other hospitals in the Union of South Africa. This therefore required that the hospital be subject to regular inspection by the Municipality Health Authority and representatives of the South African Nursing Council.<sup>11</sup> In 1942 Dr. George A. S. Madgwick joined the staff at Nokuphila Hospital from Nigeria where he started a hospital at Ile Ife. He remained here until his death in 1954.<sup>12</sup>

The first class was comprised of six student nurses. Between 1942--1946, 35 African young women, many of them from Bethel Training School, entered the school of nursing.<sup>13</sup> The training program took four and a half years to complete the course. By 1946 there were twenty-four student nurses in training. Seven nurses had graduated and had received the certificate of nursing from the South African Medical Council. The Nokuphila Hospital Training School provided opportunity for native African girls to be trained as Seventh-day Adventist nurses in the atmosphere of a good Christian institution.<sup>14</sup>

In 1944 the hospital was served by one resident doctor, two consulting doctors, two White and two African nurses. In order to qualify for registration as a nurse training school, the hospital was required to have a daily average of fifteen occupied beds.<sup>15</sup> There were 20 African student nurses in training. Nokuphila Hospital was recognized by the Transvaal Provincial Government and the South African Nursing Council as a good training school for African nurses, to which the provincial grant was directed.<sup>16</sup> In 1953 Evelyn Beechey, a Ward Sister at Nokuphila Hospital since June 1952, wrote in the British Advent Messenger, "Our hospital is well built, has sixty beds, and a new operating theatre of which we are proud. We deal with all general cases excepting midwifery, and are kept busy. The majority of our cases are surgical and the two doctors operate five days a week, starting at 6:30 a.m."<sup>17</sup>

## Historical Role of the Institution

During the 24 years of its existence, while graduating a number of African nurses, Nokuphila Hospital reported 34,932 patients admitted, 10,841 medical cases, 5,713 major, and 20,473 minor surgical operations. Of the outpatients (clinic), new cases numbered 116,758 and return visits of 145,640. The popularity of the services offered at Nokuphila Hospital is reflected in a report Evelyn Beechey wrote in 1953:

There is a large government hospital (the Coronation Non-European Hospital) only ten minutes' walk away from us, where all patients have free care and attention, but many come to us rather than go there, although we have to charge small fees. Many discharge themselves from other hospitals when they learn they need an operation, and they come to us. They say, 'Your doctors always pray with us before operating, so we know we will get better.'<sup>18</sup>

One year later, in 1954, D. Lois Burnett also wrote,

Nokuphila Mission Hospital is practically an oasis in the midst of great human need. The grounds are attractively landscaped, and the buildings are well constructed. But the greatest blessing that comes from this hospital is the knowledge of Jesus that the people receive with their medical care.<sup>19</sup>

The spiritual work was fostered by African pastors, such as Pastor T. M. Kote, the first Black chaplain from the North Bantu Mission Field who aided the staff and white doctors and nurses. According to Dr. Madgwick,

The patients, after entering the hospital wards, are continually under the influence of the gospel message. The chaplain pays regular visits to them, talks with them, loans them books on our message, and, if interested, continues to visit the patient and follows up the interest after he leaves the hospital. Studies are given in the wards on Sabbath.<sup>20</sup>

The chaplain also interested many to enroll in the Voice of Prophecy course, and several converts were led to accept the Adventist message. A female Bible worker also did some work among the patients. A church company was organized at the hospital in 1956 with an attendance of about fifty each Sabbath.

In the 1950s Dr. P. G. Peach and his assistant physicians—Dr. A. N. Ingle and Dr. Rittenhouse—worked hard to uphold Nokuphila Hospital's positive reputation in those days. In the report of the South African government medical superintendent, Dr. G. A. S. Madgwick said that Nokuphila was known as the "safe" hospital. "Patients don't die there."<sup>21</sup> From 1952 until the time of Nokuphila Hospital's closure in 1959, it had become a 60-bed medical institution catering for the health needs of Black Africans. The hospital's greatest medical activity was surgical. It enjoyed increasing patronage of African, Colored, and Indian people. It won a good reputation with the officials of the Native Affairs Departments of the Transvaal Provincial Council and the City of Johannesburg, from which the hospital received substantial and increasing grants annually from the time it commenced its operations.<sup>22</sup>

When the South African Nursing Council passed a new ruling requiring a hospital to have 100 beds to operate a training school, the Nokuphila Hospital Nurse Training School closed because it did not have money to add another forty beds. Adventist nurses thereafter had to go into government training hospitals where it was difficult for them to get Sabbath privileges. Reopening the training school was the hospital's greatest need because they wanted to send the nurses who graduated to go and work among their own people to spread the



message.<sup>23</sup>

## Closure of the Institution

Nokuphila Hospital was forced to close after all the native Africans living in the Western Native Township area (Sophiatown) that surrounded the hospital were moved to the South-Western Township (Soweto), an area 12 miles (19 kilometers) from Johannesburg. And there the government was already operating a 1,200-bed hospital. Based on a property valuer's report, Nokuphila Hospital was then sold to the Johannesburg City Council for £33,750. It officially closed its doors on October 31, 1959.

## List of Medical Superintendents

Nokuphila Hospital

A. N. Tonge (1936–1938); H. J. Davies (1940–1941); E. G. Marcus (1941–1943); G. A. S. Madgwick (1943–1950).

Nokuphila Mission Hospital

G. A. S. Madgwick (1950–1954); W. R. Grant (1954–1957); P. G. Peach (1957–1959).

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22. Madgwick & Hansen, 3.

23. Beechey, 1.

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