

Pre-independence medical journals in British Malaya: A content analysis

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study aims to describe the content of several pre-independence medical journals published in British Malaya.

Methods: The content of five journals were retrieved from National Library of Singapore e-resources and print collection of the Reference Library, Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The content of these journals was classified and descriptive analysis performed.

Results: The five journals identified were Journal of the Straits Medical Association, Journal of the Malaya Branch of the British Medical Association, Malaya Medical Journal, Malayan Medical Journal and Journal of the Malaya Branch of the British Medical Association (new series). A total of 81 issues with 873 articles were retrieved. Almost one-third of articles were concerned with these topics: malaria, mosquito control, beri-beri, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, helminthiasis, leprosy and cholera. One-fifth of the articles were case reports and 95% of the articles were written by single authors.

Discussion: The content of these journals is a good resource for those who are interested in the history of medicine – it provided substantial details on the state of public health and chronicled the medical writings of medical workers in British Malaya. It illustrates well the introduction of Western medicine to tackle health problems that arose from the interplay of immigration, poor environmental sanitation and economic exploitation.

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INTRODUCTION

The availability of digital archives of old journals via PubMed Central, Internet Archive and commercial publishers has been a boon to researchers looking for back files. However, searching for old medical references from Malaysia and Singapore usually requires one to locate a print bibliography, e.g. Bibliomed-SM,¹ then visit the reference library and attempt to locate the print content. This laborious process deterred many researchers from citing old local journal references. It is gratifying to note that the recent availability of digitized contents from the National Library of Singapore has facilitated the retrieval of old local medical journals.

This study aims to describe the content of several pre-independence medical journals published in British Malaya; historically this included several British-controlled political entities within the Malay Peninsula and Singapore between 18th to early 20th century. It is hoped that greater awareness of these journals and their content will stimulate interest in our past and increase their citations in future historical and clinical research.

METHODS

The pre-independence medical journals were identified from a review written by Lim VKE.² For the current analysis, we have decided to exclude Medical Journal of Malaya (publication years 1946-1971). The electronic full text of most issues of pre-independence medical journals were retrieved from the website of the Singapore Library Board (<http://search.nlb.gov.sg/>).

We cross-checked the above citation data by accessing IndexCat (<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/indexcat/aboutcatalogue.html>), an online catalogue of printed bibliography from the Library of the Surgeon-General, US Army. This catalogue contained materials dated from 1400s to 1950. Manual check was also done using library collection of the Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur.

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The following citation data were manually entered into the Endnote citation manager: author name, article title, keywords, author's affiliation, article summary (where available). Where possible, we identified the relevant Medical Subject Headings (MeSH terms) using the United States National Library of Medicine MeSH database (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>).

RESULTS

We identified five medical journals published in the period 1892 to 1941, with a total of 81 issues and 873 articles (see Table 1). The Malayan Medical Journal published 59.5% of the articles in the pre-independence medical journals.

We counted 181 case reports (20.7% of all articles), highlighting the frequent use this publication type to educate their readers. It is notable that several

clinical trials were published, almost all of them were experimental use of new antimalarial agents. As shown in Table 2, malaria and mosquito control were common themes (14.1% of all articles). Beri-beri was also a common topic, as were various infectious diseases especially tuberculosis, helminthiasis, diarrhoeal disease, leprosy and sexually transmitted diseases (see Table 2).

Out of 873 articles, 86 items do not have authors (these are mostly editorials or short commentaries). Among articles with named authors (n=786), 745 articles have only one author, 39 articles have two authors, and only one article has three authors. The total author count is 361. Eight authors published ten or more articles (n=109), see Table 3. Most of the authors were expatriate British doctors working for the colonial medical service or in private practice. The most prolific author was Sir David James Galloway.

Table 1: Names of journals and number of issues/articles

Year	Journal	Editors	Issues	Articles
1890–1894	Journal of the Straits Medical Association	Max Simon (Volumes 1, 2, 5) Gilmore Ellis (Volume 3) TS Kerr (Volume 4)	5	44
1903–1906	Journal of the Malaya Branch of the British Medical Association	J Kirk (Volumes 1-3)	3	48
1911–1912	Malaya Medical Journal	Gilbert Edward Brooke (Volumes 9-10)	8	47
1926–1937	Malayan Medical Journal	GH Macalister	50*	519
1937–1941	Journal of the Malaya Branch of the British Medical Association (new series)	G V Allen	15	214
Total			81	872

*Excluding five supplements which containing only news and notices, content not extracted.

Table 2: Selected topics in pre-independence medical journals

Content	Number (%)
Malaria & mosquito control	123
Beri-beri	31
Tuberculosis	29
Sexually transmitted diseases	25
Helminthiasis	24
Leprosy	19
Cholera	15

Table 3: Authors with ten or more articles

Authors	Number of articles
Galloway DJ	24
Scharff JW	21
Haridas G	12
Barrowman B	11
Monteiro ES	11
Hoops AL	10
Kanagarayer K	10
O'Connor MP	10

DISCUSSION

This content analysis of five pre-independence medical journals revealed an interesting collection of scientific articles covering the medical problems that posed diagnostic and management challenges in late 19th century and early 20th century British Malaya. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, beri-beri was a major cause of mortality, with 2,287 deaths in the Straits Settlements attributed to it in the year 1904 alone.³ The discovery of thiamine deficiency as the primary cause of beri-beri and the subsequent commercial production of this “anti-beriberi factor” made possible the use of

megadoses of this vitamin to produce a dramatic cure for cardiac beri-beri.⁴ Malaria took its toll among the rubber plantation workers and severely affected British Malaya’s economic productivity;⁵ thus, not surprisingly, this disease and its control was prominently covered in the pre-independence medical journals. In fact, the earlier issues of the Malayan Medical Journal had a subheading “Estate Sanitation” to emphasize this special focus.⁶ It is of note that malaria received substantial mention in David Galloway’s Presidential Address, which appeared in the inaugural issue of the Journal of the Straits Medical Association in 1890.⁷ The pages of the pre-independence medical journals also documented many medical discoveries and engineering feats contributed by researchers in British Malaya to control malaria.⁸⁻¹⁰ Besides malaria, other infectious diseases were also major causes of morbidity and mortality and has been the subject of historical research.^{11,12}

Judging from the authors’ names and their affiliations, most of the contributors in the pre-independence medical journals were British workers in the colonial medical service, researchers in the Institute for Medical Research and, later, clinical teachers from the King Edward College of Medicine. Sir David Galloway was the most prolific contributor even though he was in private practice (in Singapore); he published a total of 24 articles spanning a period of 42 years from the year 1890. His achievements and contributions in medicine and the socio-political arena were documented by Scharff JW (another prolific contributor focusing on mosquito control).¹³ There were several notable local contributors, they include AA Sandosham, Benjamin Sheares, Chen Su-Lan, ES Monteiro, Gopal Haridas, K Kanagarayer, and Wu Lian-Teh.

The content of some articles of the pre-independence medical journals was skewed to the needs of the local British doctors, e.g. control of malaria in the European owned plantations,⁹ and health of the European child.¹⁴ As pointed out by Harun, the colonial medical service was set up initially to provide care for the European administrators and their dependents, and subsequently

to support the economic activities of British Malaya.¹⁵ However, on closer inspection, there were also health surveys of the local population that provided useful data for health planning and public health interventions.^{16,17}

In conclusion, the pre-independence medical journals provide a glimpse of the state of public health in British Malaya and illustrate well the introduction of Western medicine to tackle health problems that arose from the interplay of immigration, poor environmental sanitation and economic activities.

Appendix: An appendix containing the content pages, lists of authors and list of topics is available in Researchgate. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329962739_PRE-INDEPENDENCE_MEDICAL_JOURNALS_IN_BRITISH_MALAYA_CONTENTS_AUTHORS_AND_TOPICS

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