

Healthcare in Brunei Darussalam: The early years



Kampung Ayer at the turn of the twentieth century

After the establishment of the British Residency in 1906, healthcare services started in Brunei Darussalam. However, at the time, it was still very rudimentary. With the appointment of the first government dresser (Leong Ah Ng) in 1911, service provision started to expand. Leong took over most of the duties from the British Resident/assistant in the delivery of medical services. Working from the post office, he was able to treat minor ailments and offer advice to the Pekan Brunei residents. He also made visits to the surrounding districts.

Another important development was the introduction of vaccination, specifically for smallpox using lymph (human serum). Initially, acceptance of Western medical treatment by the locals was poor. However, with time and after seeing the positive effects of these new measures, acceptance improved. In 1918, an indigenous (Dayak) man was recruited as a dresser. He traveled to rural areas to provide advice and treatment. His services were well received by the indigenous rural population. Unfortunately, he died less than a year after joining the service. From 1924, another dresser,

Awang Abdul Khan bin Noor Shah carried out health service provision to the rural communities. At that time, dressers were the main health care providers supplemented by monthly visits by the Strait Settlements' Medical Officers from Labuan that began in 1919.

Among other developments that had contributed to improvement in the health of the population were the migration of some of the people from the Water Village to land within Pekan Brunei including Kampung Sumbiling and Kianggeh, establishment of the sanitation board and later the building of the first State Hospital in Pekan Brunei in 1929. It was stated as early as 1911 by the Acting British Resident, Harvard Chevalier in his annual report that a state hospital would be required to manage the growing health related issues due to the growing worker (Coolie) population. Prior to the building of the Pekan Brunei hospital, also referred to as Hospital Kajang, the first hospital to be built in Brunei was in Kuala Belait. This was built by the British Malayan Petroleum Company (BMPC) in 1925 to provide healthcare service to its workers.