

## Leprosy and Curieuse Island

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An outline of the historical development of leprosy as a public health problem in the Seychelles<sup>1</sup> indicated the part played by the different leprosaria which were set up in the hope of treating and preventing the spread of leprosy, and in the earlier days the spread of leprosy in Mauritius and its other dependencies. The principal leprosarium during this period was situated on the island of Curieuse. The history of this island and its connections with leprosy is of interest and illustrates the changing importance and the attitudes to the disease in the past.

The island itself is about 3,500 m long and 2,000 m wide and reaches a maximum height of 172 m. It was named Curieuse after the ship which first discovered it in 1768.<sup>2</sup> It has had a continuing use for agricultural purposes and at some time in the past the bay on the east coast was walled off from the sea in an attempt to rear and keep green turtles. This island is coincidentally the natural home of the unique plant the coco-de-mer which is a large tree bearing double coconuts that were reputed to have aphrodisiac properties and were therefore of enormous commercial value in the past.

As the number of detected cases in the islands increased the need was felt for a place of isolation. Curieuse was not the first island used or suggested as a leprosarium in the area, as Providence Island had been in use for some time and Isle Platte and Denis Island were suggested before Curieuse was proposed as a suitable place.

The Commissioner in Seychelles wrote to the government of Mauritius on 21 October 1828:

‘What I recommend is that Government should endeavour to regain possession of the island of Curieuse by offering an equivalent to its present proprietor thus ensuring the preservation of the coco-de-mer trees that are still to be found there in their pristine beauty, secondly an eligible spot upon which the sickly crews of vessels in quarantine might be landed and

lastly a desirable place of residence for the leprous and other diseased blacks scattered over the various islands of this archipelago, Agalega and Diego Garcia.’

When one considers the speed of travel and communication at that time, commendably rapid action must have been taken as a result of this suggestion for in September 1829 a Mister William Ray offered his services as Superintendent for Curieuse, and the Commissioner in Seychelles was already having to bring to the attention of the authorities in Mauritius the difficulties of running a leprosarium for the whole territory in a letter dated 30 September 1829:

‘Sir,

As you merely mention in one of your letters having put on board the “Isette” provisions for one month I am left in doubt whether or not Government expects that the quantity of rice necessary for the subsistence of the lepers may be supplied at this Dependency and under this feeling consider it proper to acquaint you that grain of every kind is extremely scarce at the Seychelles and that it will be necessary to send from Mauritius such supplies of rice as the lepers stationed on Isle Curieuse may require.’

In July 1830 HMS *Jaseuse* visited Curieuse and the report of the doctor to the commanding officer describes the settlement as having 40 clean and commodious huts each having a small well-arranged garden stocked with vegetables and a good-sized airy hospital. There were 50 male patients, 12 women and 2 children in the leprosarium at that time.

More cases were arriving from the other islands all the time. Some of the cases were obviously extremely ill, including 4 who came in the brig *Sans Pareil* from Mauritius in August 1830. One patient, Clary Claire, died before she could embark and a further patient was too ill to travel. A patient reputed to have leprosy came from Diego Garcia in October of that year with small ulcers about the face and nose as well as having a destroyed soft palate.

Ray, the first medical superintendent of Curieuse, died in July 1833 and was replaced by Mister Boswood, late surgeon of the *Harriet*. In 1835 Doctor Robertson was appointed to the post. It was shortly after his appointment that trouble erupted, when a man with an axe attacked a woman with whom he had previously lived. She had left him because of his violent temper. As a result of this incident Doctor Robertson arranged for two men from Praslin to build a prison on Curieuse for 30 dollars. Doctor Robertson was drowned in an accident on 30 June 1846 when returning to La Dique after a visit to Curieuse. Although few people now know the origins of the name, the pass in the reef where the accident happened is still known as Passe Robertson.

Curieuse does not seem to have been used much as a quarantine station, but in 1836 the New Bedford whaler *Ansley Gibbs* was quarantined there because

of a case of smallpox on board. The maximum number of leprosy patients in the camp was 100 in 1838, but by 1851 the number of cases had dropped to 38, although there were at that time 50 people resident in the camp. This reduction in the number of cases prompted the Commissioner to write to the Government on 24 April 1851:

‘While upon the subject of Curieuse I would beg to suggest it as a matter worthy of being submitted to the consideration of His Excellency the Governor whether initiating measures might not very soon be taken for giving up the Leper Establishment altogether. I believe it has never been settled beyond a doubt that the disease is neither contagious nor infectious.

A much greater boon that is greater than the leper hospital and that is most imperiously required would be the establishment of a general hospital for all kinds of diseases at Port Victoria which after the first outlay might be maintained by the Government at a no greater expense than it now incurs for the leper settlement.’

It was decided in 1855 that the Mauritian Government would cease to use Curieuse for leprosy patients from Mauritius and the island would in future be used for cases of Seychelles origins only and also as a pauper camp.

The leprosy settlement was on one side of the island and the pauper camp some distance away. The numbers in both camps were never high and by 1890 the number of leprosy patients was as low as 4. The doctor continued to visit the camps weekly but the hospital on Curieuse was no longer in use so patients were treated in their own huts or, if more seriously ill, were transferred to the hospital on Mahe.

In spite of the enacting of an ordinance which allowed compulsory segregation of patients under certain circumstances, the numbers in the settlement remained low, so that all were eventually transferred from Curieuse to a smaller island some little distance away.

In 1900 during the Boer War it was proposed to use Curieuse as a prisoner-of-war camp but the idea was never implemented. The island reverted to agricultural use whilst the patients made a number of moves between 1900 and 1937 when the need for more space arose and other sites proved unsuitable. In 1934 it was proposed to once again build a camp on Curieuse at an estimated cost of 6,675 rupees. The transfer of patients did not take place until 1937, however.

The settlement remained under the immediate supervision of the superintendent whilst the doctor visited one day each week and was assisted on those occasions by a sanitary inspector. The numbers had been slowly increasing over a number of years as by 1947 there were 40 individuals segregated in the camp. The settlement itself was divided into three parts, the central dispensary, hospital, recreation room and shop divided the male part of the camp from the female part.

Quite ambitious works were undertaken by the people in the settlement as part of their occupational and recreational therapy and included building and construction work with the objective of making the community self sufficient. A start was made on clearing and draining land for the production of crops as well as pigs and cattle being reared to feed the patients and any surplus being used to create revenue for the settlement. Although official reports were positive and hopeful the inmates were not above creating mischief if the occasion arose. Much to the consternation of the authorities there were a number of occasions when sanitary inspectors were chased or even stoned by the irate patients who did not passively accept the regular injections that were prescribed for them. The last straw, however, was when the inmates carried out the unauthorized slaughter of the Government's cow. This sort of behaviour mirrors the indiscipline often found in other leprosaria where custodial care was practised.

In spite of these setbacks, the regular use of Dapsone either by tablet or injection was improving the condition of the patients, so that by 1965 many of the cases were cured or burnt out. Some of the patients were old and in need of care and attention and others had been in the settlement so long that they had no home to be discharged to, so on 2 March 1965 19 of them were transferred to a new camp at Anse Louis. The history of Curieuse had come full circle as the island reverted to being a place for the preservation of the coco-de-mer, as originally proposed in 1828.

### Acknowledgements

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### References

- <sup>1</sup> Grainger CR. Leprosy in the Seychelles. *Lepr Rev*, 1980, **51**, 43–9.
- <sup>2</sup> Bradley JT. *History of Seychelles*, 2 vols. Mahe, Seychelles, 1940.