

ABSTRACT

Medical Services in Jamaica

1834 - 1850

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The question of sanitation and health care was one which earned very little attention from the Jamaican medical profession as a whole and the Jamaican Assembly. The ex-slaves were expected, having become free citizens to consult physicians and provide for their families welfare. As it happened, the freed population moved away from the urban centres where their medical needs were supplied by men of their own colour. These, largely the 'hot-house' doctors of the previous era understood their maladies and sympathized with their superstitions. The settlements which the emancipated established were wrought with sanitation problems ranging from a lack of a domestic water supply to improper disposal of refuse. The Assembly paid little attention to the health needs of this group and accepted no responsibility for the living conditions of the populace. The physicians for their part, dismissed the ex-slaves as a group of dirty, ignorant and careless individuals who did not recognise their responsibility to the island to procreate and to extend their working lives for as long as possible.

The Physicians, after stating that the blacks did not consult them, argued that as a group they did not wish to part with their money and as a consequence the island's death rate had increased dramatically. This assertion had no basis, in the absence of a registry of births and deaths, but was accepted as valid by the authorities. The fear of decreasing labour force, forced the Assembly to address the question of health care, and the Dispensaries scheme came into being.

The Scheme failed however, due to lack of support on the part of the blacks and a shortage of personnel. The economic distress following the Sugar Duties Act of 1846 pushed the health question in the background and no further steps were taken despite a House Committee report on the deplorable state of the public hospital in Kingston in 1846 and a Board of Health report on the poor sanitation of Kingston in 1848.

The Health issue was brought into full focus when Cholera took its toll on the black population in 1850. The whites, responded with characteristic alarm, at the loss of their labourers but did not improve living conditions on estates or move to rehouse residents of settlements in unsanitary areas. The Home Government gave some assistance to the island and advised that the Assembly provide better medical services and dismissed all claims for special consideration.