



McCord Hospital: A century of footprints on the sands of time

*Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time*

Longfellow: 'A Psalm of Life'

I was 18 and in my last year of high school when I first set foot in McCord Zulu Hospital, as it was then known, and met with the superintendent, Dr Alan B Taylor. Tall, big, warm and grandfatherly, Dr Taylor was affectionately nicknamed 'Simotoza' by the McCord community, a made-up Zulu word that connotes something soft and huggable like a teddy bear. I was looking for a job, and he promptly hired me as a clerk and switchboard operator, and was later to help me get into medical school. I was assigned accommodation in the staff quarters, the first time I had ever had a room all to myself.

But that was not all. McCord was a uniquely safe and affirming place – an island of human sanity in the midst of an otherwise bizarrely insane universe under the thumb of Hendrik Verwoerd and John Vorster. Dr Taylor was in every sense a passive resistance warrior who consistently sought to defy and frustrate apartheid conventions. For example, he spurned the traditional practice of differential pay for doctors based on skin colour, and instead pooled the subsidy the government provided for salaries and divided it equally among all interns, black and white.

McCord enjoyed a reputation as a caring place, and became a magnet for progressive young doctors seeking to work in a space unencumbered by either racism or condescending paternalism. Dr Taylor retired in the late 1960s, but McCord has survived and blossomed, and has retained and enhanced its reputation thanks to the inspired leadership of his successors, including the present incumbent, Dr Helga Holtz, under whom McCord has become a leading centre for HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention and research.

McCord Hospital is currently celebrating 100 years of sterling service to the community. It first opened its doors on 1 May 1909 when Dr James B and Mrs Margaret McCord established a mission nursing home in the greater Durban area under the auspices of the American Board for Foreign Missions. In 1929 a young Dr Alan B Taylor, fresh from the USA, took over and led the hospital's subsequent dramatic development in diagnostic and therapeutic capacity. Over the years, as Durban expanded, a wealthy white suburb mushroomed all around this black hospital, something that would later lead to running battles with government, including threats of closure and severe restrictions on physical expansion.

Since its founding McCord Hospital has been a key pioneer and significant player in the training of health professionals, particularly from disadvantaged communities. Margaret McCord established the first nursing school for black women in what was then the Natal Colony, with the first cohort of four nurses graduating in 1914. However, there being no provision in the colonial set-up for the registration of black professional nurses, these proud graduates remained uncertified.

Few will be aware of the McCord origins of UKZN's Nelson Mandela School of Medicine. Until the 1950s, there were virtually no opportunities for black aspirant doctors to access medical training in South Africa (Wits and UCT admitted less than a handful of students of colour). What few black doctors there were mostly graduated from Edinburgh. In the late 1940s Dr Taylor began teaching a class of bright young men at McCord to become doctors, until he was alerted to the statutory requirements that medical training be located in a university and the curriculum be approved by the Medical and Dental Council. The McCord 'medical school' was illegal, and was ordered to close. That set him on a course to lobby for the creation of a medical school at the University of Natal that would admit black students. The government finally relented, and the medical school was inaugurated with Dr Taylor as the founding dean. The school's first campus, accommodated in abandoned military barracks at Wentworth, was named the Alan Taylor Residence.

For over 30 years until the 1980s this campus came to serve as the university's sole residence for all 'non-European' students irrespective of faculty. Its vibrancy made it the epicentre of anti-apartheid student activism that gave birth to the Black Consciousness Movement led by Steve Biko. Generations of today's medical and other professionals honed their talents at Alan Taylor Residence, including many now serving in senior positions in government, academia, the judiciary and civil society.

In 1963, in my third year of medicine, I was arrested and jailed for 6 months. Dr Taylor was instrumental in my release on bail, thus setting me on the long 30-year walk to the editorship of the SAMJ.

Daniel J Ncayiyana
Editor

