

Cover story



“Public Health” before independence

Shamini Prathapan

Department of Community Medicine, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

Correspondence: shamini@sjp.ac.lk

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.4038/jccpsl.v23i1.8111>

Public health in Sri Lanka dates back to 340-368AD, when King Buddhadasa in the Anuradhapura era appointed a physician for a group of ten villages. The Mahawamsa, the Pali chronicle of Sri Lankan history, refers to many public health measures taken by ancient Sinhala kings to safeguard the health of people. One such public health measure was designing of toilets for the urine to get filtered thrice before draining into the soil. A public safety officer called ‘Nagaraguttika’ was entrusted to ensure this!



Public health expanded in the island by successive occupation of the Portuguese (1505), the Dutch (1656) and the British (1796). To quarantine persons suffering from leprosy, the Dutch built Leper Asylum at Hendala in 1708. Under the British rule, public health work was the responsibility of officers of the Civil Medical Department established in 1858.

Legislations were enforced during the early British rule, controlling the spread of major communicable diseases prevalent in the country. The first legal enactment related to public health was the ‘The Public Health and Suppression of Nuisances Ordinance No. 15 of 1862’. Few other examples were control of smallpox, hookworm disease with the assistance of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation and malaria.

The first Health Unit in Asia (presently known as the Medical Officer of Health System) was established in 1926 to undertake all public health work. Dr. SF Chellappah was appointed as the first medical officer of health at the Health Unit of Kalutara, which helped pave the way to initiate the many sub-disciplines of public health, one that we are proud of even today, the maternal and child health clinics and the public health midwives in Sri Lanka.