Ida Scudder

The history of medical work in India would not be complete without the mention of a young American lady who blazed a pathway of pioneering medical service and education in south India in the early 20th century. Born to Dr. John Scudder the second and his wife Sophia, Ida Scudder was a third generation medical missionary of the Reformed Church in America. Her grandfather Dr. John Scudder was the first American medical missionary in India and his son (her father) continued the medical work in Ranipet (in the state of Tamilnadu). Ida Scudder, his youngest child was born on December 9th 1870. The only girl among five brothers, young Ida watched her parents battle against sickness and famine in their medical ministry and learnt to face the grim facts of life and death even at a very early age.

At the age of eight, Ida was sent to her native U.S.A where she spent most of her childhood, away from her parents who stayed on in India. Happy, cheerful and full of youthful vigor, the young Ida was very clear that she would never work in India as a missionary like her parents. However, during a later visit to India to look after her ailing mother, she had an experience that radically transformed her outlook and the course of her life. It was to transform the lives of countless natives who would benefit from the medical legacy that blossomed out of this experience.

The three knocks

While in India, Ida found herself alone at her home in Tindivanam one evening because her father had gone out on a medical call. In the silence of the evening, she heard a knock on the door. It was a high caste gentleman. His wife was very sick because of a difficult childbirth and he requested Ida to come and help. Ida suggested that her father would attend to the problem when he returned since she was not a doctor. The man refused to allow a man to treat his wife. He said, “She had better die than have anything like that happen.” Ida pleaded with the man but he simply refused and walked away. That very night, two more men knocked on the door, one after the other, requesting her to come to their home and help their wives who were having difficulty in child birth. In both cases, the men refused to have her father, touch or even see the face of their wives. And so they walked away.

Ida Scudder could not sleep that night - very close to where she stayed, three young women were dying simply because there was no woman doctor to help them.

Early the next morning, she heard drum-beats signaling the death of one of the women. She soon came to know that all three women had died in the night. To young Ida Scudder, this was an epiphany, a clear call from God. She made a promise to her parents to study medicine and come back to care for the women of India. She kept her promise, went back to the U.S.A. and started her medical studies. This was at a time when a woman studying medicine was a rarity. Male students were often patronizing or derisive in their attitude and in one instance a senior doctor even advised her to cut off her hair, dress like a man and study medicine. She went on to complete her course, graduating from Cornell Medical College, New York City in 1899. On January 1st 1900, Ida Scudder set foot in Vellore once again, this time as a qualified doctor to begin what would become a lifetime of service to her adopted country of India.

Vellore- from ‘Roadside clinics’ to a medical college

Ida Scudder started her work in Vellore by using a room in her bungalow, as a dispensary. Little did she know that this single bedded dispensary would slowly grow to a 2500 bedded hospital that would go on to become a premier institute for medical service, education and research in India, impacting the lives of millions within and outside the country.

As a doctor, Ida Scudder was not content to wait for sick patients to come to her. Instead she ventured out
to the villages, first in a bullock cart and then in a Peugeot car, treating the sick on the wayside, in the dusty villages, even performing dental extractions and minor surgeries under the shade of a tree. This principle of reaching out to the population was a hallmark of her service which would pass on to those who carried on the work later. With the help of friends and donors in the U.S.A. she opened the Mary Taber Schell hospital in 1902 with wards facilities for in-patients. (Presently this serves as the ophthalmology wing of CMC Vellore.)

Her surgical and medical skill, dedication to patients and most of all, her compassion resulted in large numbers of men and women filling up the hospital every day. She showed initiative and courage in trying new treatments and new surgeries as soon as they were available. She was especially skilled in surgeries on women and was ever keen to keep abreast with the latest, even innovating and devising surgical gynecological techniques. The real battle was however not against disease but against superstition and ignorance, however Dr. Ida was up to the task. Soon the little hospital was not only full but overcrowded with patients on the beds, on the floor and under the beds.

The vision of Dr. Scudder was quality and compassionate medical care to all, especially to the vulnerable group of women and children. She was convinced that Indian women would have to be trained to provide medical treatment to other women and so began a program at her hospital to instruct women nurses. This expanded into the first nursing school in India in 1946. Realizing that hospital work was not enough to meet the great need around her, she started dreaming of a medical college. By July 1918, this dream was fulfilled and the first batch of seventeen women students started their training in what came to be known as Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore.

CMC Vellore grew steadily over the years. It moved from being a modest hospital for women and children to a premier medical college of independent India. The hospital that had begun as a one room clinic became the first in India to perform open heart surgery, neurosurgery, renal transplants, and bone marrow transplants. It led the way in neglected areas such as leprosy work, community health, rehabilitation, and mental illness. It was in Vellore that Dr. Paul Brand revolutionized the treatment of Leprosy related deformities by developing reconstructive procedures using tendon transfer techniques. The institution carries the distinction of training prominent physicians and surgeons in various specialties, who went on to develop their respective fields in India. The alumni of this institution around the globe carry on this legacy. Dr. Ida Scudder continued to keep in touch with patients even after she had retired from active medical practice, until she breathed her last on May 23rd 1960. Thousands filled the streets of Vellore to pay their last respects to their ‘Aunt Ida’.

Medical missionaries have had a tremendous impact in the field of health in India and their contribution is on par with those who furthered the science of medicine with their discoveries. Dr. Ida Scudder perhaps may not figure in the list of prominent scientific contributors to the field of medicine. She rather gave of herself in an act of selfless service, daring to leave a comfortable life full of possibilities to work in an obscure, dusty little town in India- an act that would significantly impact and shape the course of medical service and education in India. Her aim in starting a medical college was not only to train Indian women and men in medical practice but also to instill in them the ideals of Christian service. In Dr. Ida Scudder’s own words regarding CMC Vellore, she said, “We are not building a medical college; we are building the kingdom of God”.

References:

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Medical missionaries have had a tremendous impact in the field of health in India. Dr. Ida Scudder’s greatest contribution was that she gave of herself in an act of selfless service, an act that would significantly impact and shape the course of medical service and education in India.