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Healing touch of Catholic church



TAKING CARE: A patient undergoing treatment at VG Hospital, Dibrugarh.

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HEALING was a central part of the way Jesus carried out His mission. Following the master, the Catholic Church always took the issue of healing seriously. Since its inception in Dibrugarh, one of its concerns has been health care.

In the 1930s, health facilities in Upper Assam were not satisfactory. Even though there was a civil hospital in Dibrugarh to which the Berry White Medical School was at-

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tached, its services were inadequate due to lack of qualified and experienced personnel. With a view to improving the condition of the hospital, the inspector general, hospitals and prisons, along with the Governor of Assam, decided to entrust the nursing service to a religious organisation.

Having heard from Mathias SDB, then prefect apostolic of Assam, the inspector general earnestly requested the Superior General of the Sisters of Charity, Bartolomea Capitanio and Vincenza Gerosa in Milan, Italy, to send some qualified sisters to take charge of the nursing administration. Accordingly, four Italian sisters, inspired by the compassionate love of Jesus, came and took charge of the hospital on April 7, 1933. They were the first missionary sisters to expand the healing ministry in upper Assam.

Overcoming the initial difficulties and believing in divine assistance, they went ahead and brought about radical transformation to the hospital. The number of patients gradually started to increase. The sisters not only helped people get better but also gave them health awareness. Their dedicated service and gentle approach captivated the patients. Services of the church personnel in the health sector of Dibrugarh thus began as early as 1933. Patients coming from all parts of Assam and other states of the Northeast experienced love and compassion of God through the loving services of these sisters. Their committed and selfless services were also a source of inspiration for the students of Berry White Medical School which later became Assam Medical College.

Patients in the hospital received very good nursing care. Its excellent nursing services made the Assam Medical College and Hospital (AMCH) one of the best health institutes in the country. In 1948, the government of Assam established the first nursing school for general nursing and midwifery in Dibrugarh and entrusted responsibility of its administration to the Sisters of Charity.

Proper attention was given to the overall development of nursing students coming from the hills and valleys of undivided Assam. While the sisters got involved in the hospital, the patients were encouraged by the visit of Bishop Oresto Marengo, first Bishop of Dibrugarh. He used to visit every patient, especially the serious ones, thrice a year, giving them consolation and encouragement. His example was followed by the parish priest frequently. As time passed,

the need for more personnel was felt and a number of Indian sisters joined. They continued to render their services in the region through Vincenza Gerosa (VG Hospital) established in 1970.

The demands of a fast-growing world brought stress-related troubles among the youth, leading them to depression, drug or alcoholic addiction. At the same time, old age-related problems like dementia were also increasing. In response to these problems, a unit for mentally challenged people was opened in 1972. Apart from the AMCH, this is the only such unit in upper Assam. The people who could not be taken care of at home are brought here and the sisters, with patience and compassion, restore them back to health. VG Hospital also collaborates with the government in the national immunisation programmes.

The outcome of a long-felt need for empowerment of women through professional nursing practice was St Gerosa Institute of Nursing in 1998. Establishment of the Community Health Association of Dibrugarh (CHAD) in 1985 opened another new chapter in the health scenario. Supported by the church authorities, it paved the way for many priests, sisters and other nurses to start health awareness programmes in the villages of upper Assam. Through health education and training of health personnel like parish health leaders, village health workers and traditional birth attendants the church reached out to poor sections of society.

Giving people knowledge about health activities is one of the main concerns of CHAD. Besides health awareness programme, services rendered through dispensaries in various parishes are commendable. They have reduced the spread of diseases like malaria and other water-borne diseases.

The efforts of some sisters have also helped some children get free treatment for congenital heart diseases and cleft lips under the sponsorship of the government and voluntary health organisations.

Also, in collaboration with the government, sisters are providing DOTS treatments for TB patients in villages. People are also trained to use herbal medicines, which are easily available and inexpensive, to treat common diseases. The catholic diocese today has twelve dispensaries in upper Assam.