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## RESEARCH & ANALYTICAL PAPERS

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### BIOT: HEALTH & MORTALITY IN THE CHAGOS ISLANDS

African Research Group

From 1877 Annual Reports by visiting Magistrates often commented on health matters in the Chagos archipelago. However no attempt was made to collate figures such as infant mortality until 1951 when the first health survey was carried out in the islands. This paper summarises their observations.



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## BIOT: HEALTH & MORTALITY IN THE CHAGOS ISLANDS

1. Under regulations promulgated in 1877, employers of labour in the Chagos archipelago were obliged to build and equip hospitals, with the number of beds on a prescribed scale according to the population size of the island or island group in question. Regular annual visits to the Chagos island plantations by a Stipendary Magistrate from Mauritius commenced in 1875. After 1877 the Magistrate's Report usually had a section on the state of the hospital and dispensary. Sometimes they commented on health matters in general. Their Reports also always contain a section on the Civil Status Records, since one of their tasks was to check that these were properly kept by the plantation managers (who acted as Civil Status Officers) and to transfer them to the Civil Status Office in Mauritius on their return. Occasionally a Visiting Magistrate explains an unusually high death rate in a particular year in the light of an "epidemic" of some kind. However, there was no attempt to collate figures e.g. for infant mortality until the visit of the Acting Director of Medical Services in Mauritius, Dr Lavoipierre, in 1951. In September-October 1955 the Governor of Mauritius, Sir Robert Scott, visited the Chagos Islands. His despatch on this visit annexes figures for 1953, which can be used to supplement Lavoipierre's tables for the years 1941-1950.
2. The earliest Magistrate's Report to throw light on mortality rates in Chagos was that of Ivanoff Dupont, who visited in early 1884. He noted that Civil Status Records showed that from 1 April 1883-7 January 1884 on Diego Garcia there were ten live births, one stillbirth, and twenty-one deaths - 15 males, one female, and five children of both sexes. However, all but four of the male deaths took place amongst the all-male workforce of the then Coaling Station (which closed down a few years later) on Middle Island.<sup>1</sup> Causes of death were registered as follows:

	ADULTS	CHILDREN
Fever	3	2
Diarrhoea		1
Consumption	5	
Old age	1	
Tetanus		2
Excess of drink	1	
Dysentery	1	
Inflamation of bowels	1	
Inflamation of stomach	1	
Hernia	1	
Anaemia	1	
Heart disease	1	

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<sup>1</sup> The population of East Point and Point Marianne coconut plantations stood at 326 at M.Dupont's arrival, comprising 191 adult males, 79 adult females, 38 boys and 18 girls.

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3. In general, visitors found that the health of labourers in Chagos was if anything somewhat better than in Mauritius. However, Magistrate Henri P. Delais discovered during his visit of October-November 1935 that according to the Diego Garcia hospital register there had been 229 admissions between June 1934 and October 1935. The manager and dispenser attributed this abnormally large number to two separate "epidemics" which broke out almost simultaneously in May 1935 and lasted nearly two months. One was "diagnosed" as "tropical malignant typho" whose main symptom was prolonged and severe fever, but a number of cases developed respiratory problems. The other disease (described as "general debility" or "guimbe-guimbe") was characterized by weakness and diarrhoea and attributed to consumption of fish and crustacea. These "epidemics" contributed to the unusually high death rate: on Diego Garcia there were 2 still births, 15 births and all of 26 deaths from January-31 October 1935 (as against 13 births and 9 deaths June-December 1934). Besides the "epidemics" of May-July 1935, causes of death listed were infantile debility, pneumonia, tuberculosis, peritonitis and infantile tetanus.

4. In March 1949 Magistrate J. Desplaces described the hospitals in Chagos as clean, well kept, and well provided - so far as he could judge - with medicine and surgical instruments:

"The inhabitants of these Islands are generally healthy but for some occasional epidemic of "Whooping Cough", "Measles" or "Influenza" introduced on each visit by the steamer coming from Mauritius. These epidemics are known there under the name of "Zambezia Epidemic"; they fortunately do not last long but, I regret to say, they are bad enough to prove fatal in some cases."

5. Dr Lavoipierre carried out the first survey of health in the Chagos Islands. His Report of October 1951 recorded that the common complaints were filariasis (elephantiasis in its later stage), ankylostomiasis (hookworm infestation), dysentery, and anaemia. His recommendations on improving sanitary conditions and controlling the mosquito responsible for filariasis (*Culex fatigans*) were duly acted on. The Governor of Mauritius visited Chagos September-October 1955 and was able to report that health conditions appeared satisfactory, with no epidemics for some years and the records showing no dominant types of ailment. The former scourge Ankylostomiasis had almost disappeared. Filariasis, prevalent until recently on Peros Banhos, had been reduced to insignificant proportions as a result of the intensive use of insecticide. Malaria (never a serious problem) had been eliminated. However, anaemia was still widespread. "The hospitals are well-maintained and provide sufficient accommodation, including antenatal and midwifery sections, with midwives in charge. The dispensaries are well-stocked and the dressers appeared to be capable of diagnosing and treating the less complicated conditions, more serious cases being sent to Mauritius."

6. Taking Lavoipierre's tables we get the following picture of mortality in the Chagos islands 1941-50<sup>2</sup>:-

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<sup>2</sup> Keeping in mind his caveat that all figures were obtained from the managers of the islands visited, and he could give no assurance as to their accuracy.

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Year	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950
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a) Diego Garcia

Total pop.	Accurate figures not available						447	536	568	604
Deaths	23	27	24	12	12	7	12	15	14	9
Births	26	25	27	20	17	22	22	17	27	24
Still births	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Infant Mortality	4	10	10 <sup>3</sup>	3	1	2	3	2	3	2
Maternal Mortality	figures not available									

b) Peros Banhos

Total pop.	330	364	387	360	372	372	313	323	328	314
Deaths	10	6	9	17	8	8	3	10	11	4
Births	15	14	17	16	16	10	13	14	18	11
Still births	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	2	0
Infant Mortality	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	3
Maternal Mortality	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

c) Salomon

Total pop.	235	?	211	222	221	219	220	224	228	223
Deaths	2	5	3	5	6	4	5	10	5	4
Births	12	11	13	10	15	12	9	13	12	13
Still births	figures not available									
Infant Mortality	1	1	1	2	0	0	3	3	2	2
Maternal Mortality	figures not available.									

7. According to Dr Lavoipierre, in 1950 the mortality figures for Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon looked as follows: Diego Garcia (total population, 604) – death rate = 14.90 per 1,000 of the population; birth rate = 39.73 per 1,000; infant mortality rate<sup>4</sup> = 83.33; maternal mortality could not be calculated. Peros Banhos (total population, 314) – death rate 12.74 per 1,000; birth rate = 35.03 per 1,000; infant

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<sup>3</sup> Lavoipierre notes the high number of infant deaths on Diego Garcia in 1942 & 1943 when it was a WWII base but offers no firm explanation.

<sup>4</sup> i.e. The number of deaths of infants under 1 year of age occurring in any one year per every 1,000 live births registered the same year.

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mortality rate = 272.72; maternal mortality rate = 0. Salomon (total population, 223) – death rate 17.94 per 1,000; birth rate = 58.30; infant mortality rate = 153.85; maternal mortality rate could not be calculated in the absence of figures.

8. Governor Scott gave the following figures for 1953: Total population Diego Garcia – 656; deaths 10; births 26; Peros Banhos – 305, 6 and 19 respectively; Salomon – 181, 5 and 9. However despite lower mortality rates because of improvements in health in the 1950s and 1960s, the Administrator of BIOT (then based in Victoria) was able to compare the Chagos figures unfavourably with those of the Seychelles in 1967. The birth rate per 1,000 was then 40 in Chagos and 37.5 in Seychelles; the death rate was 20 and 11 respectively. He commented that the very much higher death rate in Chagos was particularly marked in the 1-5 years age group, in which 6 children died in Chagos compared to 104 in Seychelles where the total population was fifty times greater.