



HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Pioneer black doctors in South Africa, 1883 - 1915

Anne Digby

The documentary 'paper trail' on the history of early black doctors in South Africa is not always clear, with some gaps in the historical record.¹ As black medical students were not admitted to South African medical schools until the 1940s, the first South African-born doctors had to qualify abroad and evidence of this is scattered and sometimes non-existent. Evident in the biographies of early black doctors in South Africa was the role of missions in helping blacks through the expensive training required, as well as the importance of family in the case of coloured and Indian applicants. For both groups the importance of locating a suitable place to practise then became a pressing one.¹

William Anderson Soga

William Anderson Soga (1858 - 1916) was the first qualified black doctor in South Africa. He was one of the 8 children of Tiyo Soga (1829 - 1871) and Janet Burnside Soga (1827 - 1903). Tiyo Soga was the first ordained Xhosa minister and had had some medical training in Scotland, although he was not fully qualified as a doctor. Tiyo's wife was a Scot, and doubtless this influenced the fact that William received his secondary education at Dollar Academy in Scotland, and his medical training at the University of Glasgow. Here he qualified in 1883, and achieved his MD the following year. Like his father and two of his brothers, William married a Scottish girl.

William Soga was ordained as a minister in 1885, and in 1887 he established the Miller Mission in Eliotdale, Bomvanaland, where he served as medical missionary until 1903. He then moved into private practice there, while his brother took over at the mission. William's son Alexander R B Soga followed in his father's footsteps, qualifying MB ChB at Glasgow in 1912, and practising first at Eliotdale and then at Idutywa.

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John Mavuma Nembula

The first Zulu to become medically qualified was John Mavuma Nembula (1861 - 1897). He was born in Amanzimtoti in KwaZulu-Natal, was educated at the Adams Mission, and then went to the USA with Reverend S C Pixley in order to assist in the translation of the Bible into Zulu. Here he took the opportunity to further his education by enrolling for a medical degree. Working his way through college by assisting in a chemist's shop, he qualified MD (Chicago) in 1887. Nembula returned to South Africa in 1888. He had planned to practise in the Eastern Cape, but he was offered a government post as acting District Surgeon of Umsinga. From 1889 to 1890 he combined this with private practice in nearby Pomeroy. He also taught hygiene and physiology to pupils at the Adams Mission, as well as working with the Bridgman family in setting up a dispensary or small hospital there. Finally, in 1896 he gained a permanent post as District Surgeon of Mapumulo, but died of TB the following year, aged only 37 years.

The Abdurahman family

The third notable individual was Abdullah Abdurahman (1872 - 1940), the first of a cluster of qualified black doctors in Cape Town. He arrived in Glasgow in 1888, and qualified 5 years later as LRCP (Edinburgh and Glasgow), and MRCS (London). He practised in Cape Town from 1895 to circa 1929, attempting to reconcile the British tradition of Western clinical medicine with the Muslim traditions of his forebears. (Abdurahman was the grandson of Abdul and Betsy Jemalee, who were freed Malay slaves from South-East Asia.) Abdurahman located his multiracial practice in Buitenkant Street, situated on the boundary between the racially mixed community of District Six and the white community in the city centre. His first marriage, to a Scottish woman, Helen Potter, may also have helped create the kind of social networks that would recruit white patients. 'His name soon became a household word amongst both Europeans and non-Europeans ... Everywhere one heard people talking about "the clever young Malay doctor".'⁴ Abdurahman's practice flourished and he became a wealthy man with a large house, a second holiday home, more than one car, and even a yacht. As part of a small coloured elite he soon became assimilated into middle-class society in Cape Town.

Abdurahman was even better known for his political than his medical activities. He was the founder and President of the African (later People's) Organisation from 1905 to 1940,



...serving as the first 'coloured' member of the Cape Town City Council (from 1904 to 1940, with the exception of 2 years from 1913 to 1915), and was also the first coloured member of the Cape Provincial Council (from 1914 to 1940.) Abdurahman's work as Cape Town City Councillor included public health interventions aimed at improving the health of his coloured constituents.⁵⁻⁷

Ismael Abdurahman was the brother of Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, and qualified MB ChB at the University of Glasgow in 1915. Waradea, the daughter of Abdullah Abdurahman, was the first black woman doctor in South Africa. She graduated MB ChB at Glasgow in 1927, and developed a practice in Cape Town. Coming from a similar Malay background to Abdurahman, Mohammed Omer Dollie qualified LSA in London, circa 1906, before developing a Muslim practice in Cape Town.

Abdul Hamid Gool

Another of the early black doctors in Cape Town was Abdul Hamid Gool (1886 - 1973). He was the son of Malay and Indian parents, became the son-in-law of Abdullah Abdurahman, and was the next within this extended Abdurahman family to qualify as a doctor. Gool qualified in London with an MB and BS in 1910, before developing a medical practice in the racially mixed District Six, Cape Town. He also worked to improve the secular education of Muslim children. (His wife, Cissie Gool, was perhaps even better known, being a municipal councillor

and political activist like her father, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman). Abdul's brother was Goolam Husain Gool, who studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, London and who qualified LRCP, London in 1931, followed by an MRCS, England the following year. He practised first in Wynberg and later in Claremont, both in the southern suburbs of Cape Town. Goolam Gool was a political activist in the All African Convention of 1935 and also became President of the National Liberation League. Increasingly he challenged Dr Abdullah Abdurahman's hegemony in coloured politics; in 1943 he founded the anti-Coloured Affairs Department (anti-CAD) Movement, and became vice-chair of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM.)

In addition to the individuals discussed, two early black doctors who had not been born in South Africa practised here – the West Indian A C Jackson, and the Indian doctor Umedram Laibhai Desai. Black doctors, viz. Drs Sebeta and Motebang, also worked in neighbouring territories such as Basutoland.

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3. Sonderling NE, ed. *New Dictionary of South African Biography*. Pretoria: Vista University.
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5. Raynard JH, ed. *Dr A Abdurahman. A Biographical Memoir*. In: Adhikari M, ed. *Cape Town: Voices of Black South Africans Series*. 2002: 10.
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