

ILLNESS AND HEALTH SERVICES IN BARBADOS

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Barbados, B. W. I.

Barbados is an island situated in the Caribbean Sea 13° N. of the equator. It is composed mostly of limestone, and though its surface is devoid of rivers, there are myriad underground streams which provide excellent drinking water. The shores of the island are covered with white sandy beaches and washed by sparkling blue water. The temperature during the past thirty years has ranged from an extreme maximum of 92.5° to an extreme minimum of 60.5° with an average of 86.1° and a mean minimum of 71.6°F.

Nine years had elapsed since I last visited my home. It was August 1965 and I had returned for a three week vacation. I was not only interested in enjoying my vacation but in discovering what illnesses could prevail in such a beautiful place and what health services were provided.

Administration of Health Services.

Health services are administered by the Central as well as Local Government. The Central Government administers Queen Elizabeth Hospital, The Enmore Diagnostic Clinic, a district maternity hospital, and a small hospital for lepers. Hospital administrators are responsible to the Director of Medical Services who is in turn responsible to the Minister of Health. The island is divided into 11 parishes each of which has an infirmary and a District Medical Officer, but for the purposes of Local Government administration it is organized into the Northern, Central and Southern divisions with 3 to 4 parishes comprising a division. The infirmaries and District Medical Officers provide free medical care, drugs and hospitalization for the aged, indigent and children who are abandoned or handicapped. Local Government also provides poor relief, sanitary inspectors and public health nursing services in its districts.

Population. Barbados was estimated to have a population for the period ending December 31st, 1964 of 244,165 persons, which was a net increase over the previous year of 1.59 per cent. The natural increase was 418 less than in 1963.

Birth rate. In 1964, the birth rate was 26.6 per thousand of population while in 1963, it was 29.1 per thousand compared to the Canadian rate of 26.1 (1961). There has been a steady fall in the birth rate in Barbados since 1961 when it was 28.1 per thousand due in part to mass migration of young women and to the birth control program instituted about that time.

Death rate. The death rate in 1964 was 8.7 per thousand compared to 8.8 in 1963. The rate in Canada in 1961 was 7.7 per thousand. The infant mortality rate was still alarmingly high in 1964, 53 per 1000 live births which was a decrease from 61 per 1000 in 1963, but was about twice the rate in Canada.

There was an increase of 41 deaths in 1964 over the previous year. The rate of natural increase was 17.9 per thousand, almost equal to the Canadian rate.

Some of the chief causes of death in 1963 were:

Disease	No. of deaths
Diseases of infancy	254
Diseases of circulatory system	436
Pneumonia	121
Syphilis	27
Gastroenteritis and colitis	64
Cancer	241
Tuberculosis	11
Tetanus	16
Typhoid	1

Infant mortality. Tables 1 and 2 below shows the specific infant mortality rate and the causes of infant death for 1964.

*5th Year Medicine.



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Table 1

**INFANTS. DEATHS BY AGE IN MONTHS
% DISTRIBUTION
1964**

AGE AT DEATH	Deaths in First Year of Life	
	Number	% Distribution
Total Under 1 year	339	%100
Under 28 days	187	55.2
Under 1 day	13	3.8
1 - 6 days	124	36.6
7 - 27 days	50	14.8
28 days - 11 months	152	44.8
28 days - 2 months	35	10.3
3 months - 5 months	49	14.4
6 months - 8 months	37	10.9
9 months - 11 months	31	9.2

Note: Of the 6,506 infants born in 1964, 187 died in the first month of life; the neonatal mortality rate therefore was 29 per 1,000 live births.

Of the 6,319 that survived the first month of life, 152 died before completing the first year of life; the mortality rate for infants in the second to twelve months of life therefore was 24 per 1,000 infants alive at the beginning of the second month of life. The infant mortality rate was 52 per 1,000 live births.

Table 2

PRIMARY CAUSES OF DEATHS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE:

NUMBER OF DEATHS; PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION FOR THE YEAR 1964

Cause of Death	Deaths in the First Year of Life	
	Number	% Distribution
All Causes	339	100
Prenatal & Natal Causes	201	59.3
Premature Births	109	32.1
Congenital Malformations	11	3.2
Injury at Birth	7	2.1
Congenital Debility	12	3.5
Other Diseases peculiar to first year of life	51	15.0
Syphilis	4	1.2
Tetanus	7	2.1
Respiratory Diseases	43	12.7
Gastrointestinal Diseases	32	9.4
Epidemic and Other		
Communicable Diseases	9	2.7
Malnutrition	29	8.6
All other Specified Causes	24	7.1
Ill Defined & Unknown Causes	1	.21

Note: Infant morbidity rate is .21

Beds, personnel and admission. There are 80 registered physicians in Barbados. Total hospital bed capacity is 2,897 allocated as follows:

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT	
Hospital	No. of Beds
Queen Elizabeth Hospital	80 paediatric 70 Obs. & Gyn. 483 Med. & Surg.
Mental Hospital	800
Leprosy Hospital	11
Tuberculosis Hospital	40
Total	1,484

LOCAL GOVERNMENT	
Hospital	No. of Beds
11 Infirmaries	} 1,413
Non-government	

The mean monthly admission rate at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital is 932 persons. The average stay in hospital is 7.5 days.

Costs. In 1964 the Gross National Product was 147.1 million dollars. Total expenditure of the Central Government was 31.3 million dollars with a capital expenditure of 8.2 million dollars, of which 1.4 million dollars was spent on 'Health and Housing'. Total Public Health expenditure was not available. In 1959, the last year for which figures were available, Local Government spending was 3.2 million dollars, with 1.5 million dollars for public health while Central Government expenditure was 22.2 million dollars, with 4.5 million dollars for Health and Housing.

Summary. The preceding description has shown that the natural population increase in Barbados is almost equal to that of a highly developed country, that the death rate is low 8.7 per 1000 but the infant mortality rate is very high 53 per 1000 live births. It also shows that certain infectious diseases are still prominent causes of death. Hospital facilities are quite adequate, but the number of medical personnel is inadequate. Finally, both levels of government spend a tremendous amount of money on health services - Local Government 50% and the Central Government about 20% of their budget.