



Stories from two of the pioneers from Mount Alvernia Hospital Singapore

Sr Pauline Sewell and Sister Jean Marie Andrews wore multiple hats to cover numerous functional roles at the hospital, but a singular attitude united the pioneer FMDM sisters who built up Mount Alvernia Hospital.

MyAlvernia find out more from **Sister Pauline Sewell** and **Sister Jean Marie Andrews**.

Driving the ambulance to deserted lanes to pick up sick people in the middle of the night; doing an x-ray of an amputated limb; offloading a patient with a burst appendix from a six-storey tall oil tanker onto a tiny launch boat amidst tumultuous waves; and rowing a sampan to an offshore ship to collect blood from sailors.

These are just some of the many 'little' adventures that the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) Sisters had to deal with during the early years of Mount Alvernia Hospital.

Recalling the blood collection trips, Sr Pauline mused, "We paddled out in a small boat using oars. Water just splashed in, there were no life jackets, and I couldn't swim!" Together with another Sister who worked in the lab then, Sr Andreina Chin, the pair made regular trips to visiting ships to collect blood from sailors as there were no blood banks in the past.

"I was petrified of drowning but nothing stopped us," confessed Sr Pauline.

Sr Jean Marie shared another incident where flexibility and fast thinking saved the day. The team had to transfer a patient with a burst appendix from a huge oil tanker in the open waters onto a small launch boat. However, raging waves prevented the boat from getting close enough to the ship. So, the patient had to be un-strapped from the stretcher and 'thrown' from the ship to the boat. "I was asked to 'catch' the patient and thank God, I managed to hold onto him!" she recollected with a laugh. "We could have both landed in the sea with him in my arms!"

Fearless in the face of shortages

Thinking on their feet, keeping options open, multi-tasking and carrying out tasks with a 'just do it' attitude was all in a day's work for the Sisters as they had to contend with a shortage of medically trained staff, and the limited technology and medical equipment available in the 1960s.

Back in those days, hundreds of x-ray and ECG cases were managed single-handedly by Sr Jean Marie who was in charge of the radiography department – from operating the machines to developing and processing the films in a darkroom. She also stood in as ambulance driver and handled administration duties when necessary.

"I would be in the middle of doing an x-ray for a patient and be called in to handle an ambulance task," said the jovial 80-year-old who helmed the radiography department for 20 years (1961 - 1981).

From a simple department capable of only x-rays and ECGs, Mount Alvernia now has a well-equipped Diagnostic Imaging Department with a team of professionals with dedicated roles. The darkroom has also made space for high-tech equipment that can produce detailed scans in seconds.

"It has progressed so much. If I go back now, they won't have me," jested Sr Jean Marie.

Duty Calls 24/7

The Operating Theatres (OT) have also transformed considerably over the years. Sr Pauline used to work in the OT and revealed the 'tough' working conditions – they were on duty and on call 24/7; there was no duty roster; no holidays; no modern equipment nor sophisticated surgery procedures. Compared to the scene today, it was "a totally different world".

"We had to scrub up, assist surgeons, be a runner, make toast for the doctors, prepare the trolleys, etc.," she listed. "But things happen so fast, you adjust quickly into your roles."

Sr Pauline, who is in her mid-70s now, was also matron of Assisi Hospice from 1998 to 1999, during which she mooted the idea of a Children's Daycare Centre for children with cancer.

"There were a lot of old patients but where were the children? I had a deep down conviction that there must be a rehabilitation centre for these children so that they too could have a support group."

In her opinion, the proliferation of advanced medical technology, training of nurses and handing over of the Hospital from the FMDM Sisters to lay management have opened up many avenues and helped the Hospital keep pace with the rising demands of the medical industry.

Sr Jean Marie echoed her sentiments, "We had no computers and no hierarchy. We ran the hospital based on our own system but we were not trained for administration. To become better, change was necessary."

Unique Culture of Service

Although the 'hardware' of the hospital might have undergone a massive makeover, the ethos of the FMDM Sisters who are mostly retired from hospital duty now, is still strongly preserved in the Hospital's culture.

The FMDM ethos stems from being trained to put one's heart and soul into serving every person who walks into the hospital. Every action aims at the welfare of the patient. Even if you don't speak the same language, even with the presence of obstacles, it is possible to bridge the differences.

"With passion and love, any hurdle can be overcome," assured Sr Pauline who added that throughout the past 50 years, whether run by the Sisters or now by lay management, commitment and a positive attitude in serving is something that comes from every single one at Mount Alvernia.

For Sr Pauline, it all boils down to "the willingness to embrace challenges with joy."

