

George H.V. CLARKE

- A PIONEER



GEORGE, AO

THE history of dermatological services in Nigeria dates back to the 1950s when Dr George H.V Clarke, an expatriate, opened up the field of dermatology. He was based in Lagos - the former capital of Nigeria. Lagos then had a population of nearly one million. Clarke was appointed by the Nigerian Ministry of Health as a medical officer to provide in-patient and out-patient services at the General hospital.

He had been at St. John's hospital for skin diseases for some months before coming to Nigeria. Dermatology as a sub-speciality was a neglected field of medicine in Nigeria when he arrived. Being the only trained dermatologist, he was patronized from many areas beyond Lagos. Documenting his experience as a pioneer of dermatology, he wrote:

"The key conditions in the environment are heat and frustration. The former is being overcome by air conditioning; the frustration largely arises from lack of staff and trained personnel. The consultant at home (in the U.K) may think he is doing well if he sees 20-25 patients in a session. In the tropics it is nothing to see anything from 50 to 100 patients per session. One happy result of the shortage of doctors is the relations between them – the patients are nearly always cordial"

From his documentation, no doubt his early experiences must have been interesting but for the weather and climate peculiar to the tropics. Although the emphasis at this stage of dermatology in Nigeria

was on service, Clarke was able to document his experience in Nigeria in a book titled "Skin diseases in the African" published in 1959, consisting of 172 pages with many photographs – black and white prints.

Despite his heavy work load and busy schedule, he undertook some research projects as well as posing some dermatological riddles for the medical

personnel of his day. Some of these riddles are yet to be solved. Like Edward Jenner in his busy general medical practice (in the United Kingdom) Clarke equally did not fail to keep documentation of what he came across. He emphasised in his publication the vast research opportunities available to dermatologists in virgin areas of dermatology such as mycology. For instance in 1953 *Trichophyton sudanense* was found to be the commonest fungus causing scalp ringworm in Nigeria. This was a fungus discovered by Joyeux in the

French Sudan. Clarke was also interested in establishing the aetiopathogenesis of dermatoses such as dermatitis cruris pustulosa et atrophicans and ainhum, which were yet to be established at the time.

Clarke left Lagos in 1962; two years after Nigeria got her independence from Britain. With the exit of Clarke, Anezi Okoro, who is the father of Nigerian dermatology, assumed duty from 1963 at the General hospital and at the Massey Street Children's hospital – both in Lagos.

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Below are some of the scientific documentations of Clarke:

1. G. H. V. Clarke. Skin disease in a developing tropical country. **British Journal of Dermatology**. Volume 74, Issue 4, April 1962: 123–126.
2. G. H. V. Clarke. 3rd Pan-African Congress of Dermatology. **International Journal of Dermatology**. Volume 26, Issue 10, December 1987, Page: 670,
3. A. Catona, D. S. Nurse and G. H. V. Clarke. Letters to the editor. **Australasian Journal of Dermatology**. Volume 27, Issue 2, August 1986, Page: 96
4. G. H. V. Clarke. Spontaneous diminution of basal-cell carcinoma, **British Journal of Dermatology** Volume 79, Issue 7, July 1967, Page: 425,
5. G. H. V. Clarke, Polyneuritis as an apparent complication of calciferol treatment and some

observations on its local use, **British Journal of Dermatology** Volume 61, Issue 12, December 1949, Pages: 409–413,

6. G. H. V. Clarke. Pruritus vulvae from rubber, due to allergic sensitivity to alkali, **British Journal of Dermatology**. Volume 60, Issue 2, February 1948, Pages: 57–60,

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1. O. Somorin. **A short history of Dermatology in Lagos, Nigeria**. International J. Dermatol.
2. Adekunle O. George. **Dermatology in Nigeria: evolution, establishment and current status**. Int J. Dermatol. 2004; 43 :223-226
3. G.H.V. Clarke. Skin disease in a developing tropical country. **British Journal of Dermatology**. Volume 74, Issue 4, April 1962: 123–126