

Dr. The Honourable Roberto Alexandre de Senna Fernandes de Castro Basto Hong Kong Rotarian elected to serve Sanitary Board and Urban Council

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Dr. The Honourable Roberto Alexandre de Senna Fernandes de Castro Basto, DOMS, MRCS, LRCP, MBBS (*HKU*) (5 February 1898 – 18 November 1980), holding the Classification “Medicine – Ophthalmology”, was an Active Member of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社) in the 1930-40s. He was a Macanese medical doctor and Elected Member of the Hong Kong Sanitary Board (潔淨局) and later Urban Council (市政局).

Basto was a Macanese-born physician of Portuguese descent who earned an MBBS from the University of Hong Kong (香港大學) in 1921, becoming the second local Portuguese graduate from the institution, and later practiced in the British Crown Colony Hong Kong as well as Sydney, Australia. In Hong Kong, he contributed to public health governance by winning uncontested election to the Sanitary Board in 1930 and 1933, transitioning to the Urban Council in 1936 with re-election in 1937, though he lost his seat in 1940. He also published medical research, including a study on a syphilis precipitation test featured in journals such as the 《American Journal of Public Health》, and served on the editorial staff of the Hong Kong University medical journal 《The Caduceus》. Relocating to Australia amid the Pacific War (1941-1945), he established a specialist practice in eye, ear, nose, and throat medicine in Sydney from 1942. His career ended in controversy when, in 1954, he was convicted by a New South Wales jury of administering poison to his infant daughter with intent to murder and of attempted suicide, receiving a death sentence on the former count (later subject to unsuccessful appeals, including to the High Court of Australia).



A sketch of R. A. de Castro Basto

Early Life and Medical Training

Roberto Alexandre de Senna Fernandes de Castro Basto, commonly known as R. A. de Castro Basto, was born on 5 February 1898 in Macao (澳門), a Portuguese colony at the time, into a prominent family within the local Portuguese-Macanese community. His parents were José Maria

de Castro e Basto, a businessman who engaged in fundraising efforts for community projects including visits to Europe alongside associates like J. A. Barretto, and Casimira de Senna Fernandes. The de Castro Basto family held influence among the Portuguese elite in Macao and later extended their presence to Hong Kong through professional and civic roles. Roberto was the younger brother of Carlos Henrique Basto, who also pursued public service in Hong Kong, including election to the Sanitary Board in 1932 during Roberto's incumbency.

R. A. de Castro Basto pursued his medical education at the University of Hong Kong, completing Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) in May 1921. This made him the second individual of Portuguese descent from Macao to graduate in medicine from the institution. He received authorization to practice medicine within the British Crown Colony Hong Kong in July 1921.

Roberto augmented his primary qualification with advanced credentials, including Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS), Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (LRCP), and Diploma in Ophthalmic Medicine and Surgery (DOMS), as evidenced by his professional listings in medical publications by 1928. These postgraduate diplomas, typically obtained through examinations in the United Kingdom, reflected specialized training in surgery, general practice, and ophthalmology, aligning with his subsequent clinical interests in eye conditions and public health diagnostics.

During his early postgraduate period, Roberto engaged in academic activities at the University of Hong Kong, serving on the editorial staff of the 《Hong Kong University Medical Journal》 and contributing to research, such as a precipitation test for syphilis developed in collaboration with Professor Wang Chung-Yick (王寵益教授), published in journals including the 《American Journal of Public Health》. In 1928, he renamed the journal 《The Caduceus》, indicating his involvement in shaping medical discourse shortly after qualification.

Professional Career in Medicine

Upon qualification, Roberto established a private medical practice in Hong Kong, specializing in eye conditions, which formed the basis of his early professional career before broader public service roles. By 1928, he was contributing articles to the 《Hong Kong University Medical Journal》, including one on strabismus (squint), demonstrating his focus on ophthalmic diagnostics and treatment in clinical settings. His practice during this period catered primarily to the local Portuguese-Macanese community and wider urban population, leveraging his multilingual capabilities and colonial medical standards, though specific patient volumes or clinic locations remain undocumented in available records. This foundational work in ophthalmology underscored his expertise, with no evidence of initial hospital affiliations or overseas postings prior to local establishment.

Contributions to Public Health in Hong Kong

Dr. Roberto Basto's medical background complemented his public service. As a practitioner affiliated with the Government Medical Department and the University of Hong Kong, he contributed to local medical literature via the 《Hong Kong University Medical Journal》, where he served on the editorial staff. His publications included analyses of acute inflammations in the anterior segment of the eyeball, a condition relevant to tropical climates like Hong Kong's, as well

as a co-authored study on a precipitation test for syphilis published in the 《American Journal of Public Health》, aiding in the dissemination of knowledge on preventable ocular health issues and diagnostic methods among practitioners. Such efforts supported broader public health goals by enhancing diagnostic and treatment capabilities for common ailments in the population.

Political Involvement

Election to the Sanitary Board

Roberto was elected to the Hong Kong Sanitary Board on 8 December 1930 without contest, replacing the outgoing member José Pedro Braga (布力架) in one of the two unofficial seats reserved for ratepayers. The election process involved nominations from qualified voters on the jury lists, reflecting the limited franchise typical of colonial advisory bodies at the time.

His uncontested victory underscored his standing within the Portuguese-Macanese community and among public health advocates in the Colony, where the Sanitary Board oversaw critical functions such as waste management, disease prevention, and urban sanitation amid growing population pressures. Roberto's medical background positioned him to address pressing issues like epidemic control and infrastructure improvements, though specific campaign details remain sparse in records, likely due to the absence of opposition.

Following a temporary absence---during which Carlos Henrique Basto briefly held the seat in late 1932---Roberto returned and secured re-election to the Sanitary Board on 27 December 1933, again without contest. This re-election affirmed his continued influence, as the Board grappled with interwar challenges including housing density and public hygiene in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. The Sanitary Board's role evolved shortly thereafter, transforming into the Urban Council in 1936, to which Roberto transitioned seamlessly.

Role and Achievements in Public Service Criticisms and Challenges

In 1936, the Sanitary Board was restructured into the Urban Council, which expanded responsibilities to broader urban governance, and Roberto was re-elected to this body on 13 January 1937, maintaining his emphasis on sanitary policy and resident welfare. During his tenure, he actively questioned government policies, as evidenced by discussions in the Legislative Council (立法局) referencing his inquiries at an Urban Council meeting on 10 November 1936 regarding urban administration matters.

A notable achievement came in 1938, when Roberto, representing the Kowloon Residents' Association (九龍居民協會), protested the colonial government's proposal to site refugee camps within or near residential areas in Kowloon, citing potential nuisances and health risks to inhabitants. He advocated relocating such sites to the New Territories (新界) to mitigate public health threats. His service ended after the 29 February 1940 Urban Council election, where he received 266 votes against Dr. Alberto Maria Rodrigues's (羅理基醫生) 407, polling from his residence at Beau Sejour, 123 Argyle Street, Kowloon (九龍亞皆老街 123 號).

Roberto encountered challenges in advocating for enhanced public sanitation amid colonial resource constraints during his service on the Sanitary Board, later reformed as the Urban Council in 1936. His inquiries highlighted systemic issues, such as inadequate water allocation for street cleaning, which posed risks to public health and the Colony's appeal as a tourist destination.

In a November 1936 Urban Council meeting, Roberto questioned the feasibility of using stored water---then at approximately 4,274 million gallons with weekly consumption of 158 million gallons---for regular street flushing, pressing for government action to mitigate health hazards from neglected roads. The ensuing Legislative Council discussion revealed governmental reluctance due to water scarcity and staffing limits, resulting in a compromise: weekly rotational flushing of principal urban streets using limited main water supplies, rather than proposed nightly operations. This outcome underscored the difficulties board members faced in securing policy shifts against fiscal and logistical barriers.

No major personal criticisms of Roberto's performance appear in contemporary records, though his persistent questioning of administrative priorities reflected broader tensions between elected representatives and colonial authorities over public welfare priorities. His role as a Portuguese-Macanese member also implied representational challenges in a politically diverse body dominated by British officials and Chinese appointees, where minority community interests vied for attention.

Personal Life and Controversies

Family and Relationships

Roberto Alexandre de Senna Fernandes de Castro Basto was born on 5 February 1898 in Macao to José Maria de Castro e Basto (born 6 March 1854 in São António, Macao; died 21 February 1934 in Hong Kong) and Casimira Catarina de Senna Fernandes (born 31 July 1863; died 28 November 1942), a couple who resided in Hong Kong and owned a home named "Milalda" in Ho Man Tin (何文田) after two of their daughters. He had an elder brother, Carlos Henrique Basto (1890–1944), who succeeded him on the Hong Kong Sanitary Board during his absence in 1932.

Roberto's parents had multiple children, including unnamed sons who owned properties near the family home and daughters Milla and Alda, for whom the residence was named. These siblings reflect the broader Macanese family networks in colonial Hong Kong. Later in life, Roberto married Carol Small, with whom he had one child, daughter Michelle Christine Basto. No further relationships or descendants are noted in historical accounts of his personal life.

1954 Legal Incident

In December 1953, Dr. Robert Alexander de Castro Basto, a specialist in eye, ear, nose, and throat medicine practicing on Macquarie Street in Sydney, took custody of his approximately two-year-old daughter, Michelle Christine Basto, from his estranged wife for the day but failed to return her by the agreed time of 5 p.m. That evening, his flat was discovered in disarray, with the child found unconscious on the floor and Roberto semi-conscious on the bed, exhibiting hypodermic needle marks indicative of drug injection. Various substances, including morphine sulphate, sodium pentothal (an anesthetic), and chloral hydrate (a sedative), were present in the residence. Medical examination confirmed the child had been administered a poison, leading to her coma, while Roberto had ingested drugs in an apparent self-harm attempt. Both were hospitalized at St. Vincent's Hospital, where the child recovered following interventions such as carbogen administration to stimulate respiration, though her condition was consistent with morphine or chloral hydrate poisoning, which could have proven fatal without prompt treatment.

Roberto, aged 55 and residing at Elizabeth Bay Road, Potts Point, was arrested and charged on 22 December 1953 at Sydney's Central Court with feloniously administering poison to his daughter with intent to murder her and with attempting to commit suicide, stemming from the events of December 13th. During committal proceedings on 14 January 1954, hospital staff testified to Roberto's drugged state upon arrival and his admission that the child had received morphine, overriding initial claims of medical privilege to disclose relevant details. He was committed for trial on both counts, with evidence including his purchase of pentothal sodium ampoules and consultations on administration methods.

The trial commenced on 22 March 1954 before Justice Maguire and a jury in the Central Criminal Court of New South Wales. Prosecutors argued premeditated intent to harm the child, citing the drugs' lethal potential and Roberto's confessional statements to police, made while under the influence but deemed voluntary by the court. Roberto's defense highlighted his drugged condition during statements and questioned inferences of murderous intent, noting chloral hydrate's use as a pediatric sedative, but the jury convicted him on both charges. For the attempted murder count, a death sentence was recorded as mandated. Sentencing on the suicide attempt was deferred.

Roberto appealed the conviction to the New South Wales Court of Criminal Appeal, contending the verdict was against the evidence weight, inadmissible evidence was allowed, jury misdirection on poison administration and intent, and availability of fresh evidence. The appeal was dismissed. He then sought special leave to appeal to the High Court of Australia, arguing inadequate jury directions on intent (e.g. chloral hydrate's non-lethal implications) and the probative value of his drug-influenced confessions, but on 17 December 1954 Chief Justice Dixon and Justices Webb, Fullagar, Kitto, and Taylor refused leave, affirming the trial judge's sufficiency in addressing intent and statement voluntariness as a judicial matter separate from jury consideration. The death sentence, standard for such convictions under New South Wales law at the time, was not executed, consistent with Australia's evolving practices toward commutation.

Later Years and Post-Hong Kong Residence

Following the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in December 1941, Roberto relocated to Australia during the Pacific War and established a medical practice in Sydney beginning in 1942. He specialized in ophthalmology, operating from an office on Macquarie Street in central Sydney by the early 1950s. His residential addresses during this period included Elizabeth Bay Road in Potts Point and Lucas Road in Burwood, suburbs of Sydney.

Rotarian Dr. R. A. de Castro Basto, having relocated to Australia after his tenure in Hong Kong, died on 18 November 1980 at the age of 82. No public records detail the precise location or cause of death, though his presence in Sydney during a 1954 legal proceeding suggests he resided there in later years.

Legacy and Impact

R. A. de Castro Basto, as a prominent Macanese physician and public servant, significantly advanced the representation of the Macanese community in Hong Kong's colonial governance

during the 1930s. Elected unopposed to the Hong Kong Sanitary Board on 8 December 1930, he succeeded José Pedro Braga as the Portuguese representative, thereby ensuring continued Macanese input into public health policy at a time when the community sought greater visibility amid rapid urbanization and health challenges. His re-election on 27 December 1933 further solidified this role, transitioning seamlessly to the Urban Council upon its formation in 1936, where he was re-elected on 13 January 1937.

Through these positions, Roberto influenced urban and sanitary reforms that benefited the Macanese diaspora in Hong Kong, many of whom resided in densely populated areas like Kowloon. In 1938, he vocally opposed government plans for refugee sites in residential zones, citing health risks and nuisances, and advocated for relocation to the New Territories on behalf of the Kowloon Residents' Association---a stance that highlighted community advocacy against policies potentially exacerbating living conditions for Portuguese-descended residents. His medical expertise, including contributions to syphilis testing research published in journals like the 《American Journal of Public Health》, underscored a professional legacy that elevated Macanese professionals in public discourse on health equity.

Roberto's service exemplified the Macanese community's push for integration into British administrative structures, paving the way for subsequent generations by demonstrating the viability of local Portuguese leaders in elected roles. Although his 1940 Urban Council bid ended in defeat, his earlier terms fostered precedents for Macanese participation, contributing to the community's enduring identity as a bridge between Portuguese heritage and Hong Kong society before wartime disruptions prompted his relocation to Australia in 1942.

Medically, he contributed empirical insights into local disease patterns, notably through a 1928 analysis of 25 fatal broncho-pneumonia cases in Hong Kong infants, highlighting etiological factors like bacterial infections prevalent in the subtropical climate. Such work aligned with broader efforts by the Hong Kong Medical Association (香港醫學會) to combat infant mortality, which exceeded 200 per 1,000 live births in the interwar era.

In aggregate, Roberto exemplified the constrained yet participatory role of Luso-Asians in British Hong Kong's governance, with tangible inputs to sanitation policy but no documented paradigm-shifting reforms. His legacy, confined to niche archival mentions in Macanese and Rotary histories, is substantively diminished by the criminal conviction, rendering broader historiographical influence negligible absent evidence of enduring institutional or intellectual impacts.



**He Who Serves Best
Profits Most:
Building People and
Leaving a Legacy**

Correspondence — Is “Caduceus” a Proper Name for the Society Newspaper? II

R. A. De Castro Basto

1928 Volume 7 Issue 1

22nd February, 1928.

The Editor,

“The Caduceus.”

Dear Sir,

I note in the November issue of your journal that your Executive Committee proposes to change the name of “The Caduceus” to that of the “Hong Kong University Medical Journal.” Before adopting such a measure it is well to consider whether such an alteration would be advisable. Whereas the journals produced by the Universities and Colleges in England, depend for their graduates and undergraduates. “The Caduceus” unlike them, is fostered by a large number of medical men who have no link or tie of affinity with our University. Our journal is to-day not so much the official organ of the Medical Society, but as the representative of the medical opinion of Hong Kong in general. It has, in other words, attained that position which the founders had in mind at the time of its inception, when they said in the foreword of the first number of “the Caduceus” — “We do not intend merely to make this journal a record of the activities of the Medical Society of the University. We aim to make it one of the leading scientific journals in Asia. How far our aim will bear fruit depends a great deal on the support not only of the undergraduates and graduates of the Faculty but also of medical men and scientific workers throughout China.” It was pursuant to this idea that I suggested the name “Caduceus” as a title to the journal, and also submitted the design for the cover. For the name “Caduceus” apart from the beautiful association which it evokes has the advantage of being undenominative.

To it anyone may contribute articles or apply for enrolment as a subscriber without experiencing any sense of compunction. Should the underlying idea of the proposed alteration be founded on the desire to bring the name of University Medical Society into greater prominence abroad, then we would

be defeating our own object if the number of “outside” subscribers were to diminish.

“By their fruits you shall know them.” The Medical Society will gain all the recognition it wants if its product, “ The Caduceus,” continues to make that progress towards a higher and higher standard that has been characteristic of it hitherto, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of the present Secretary and Editorial Staff.

I am, etc.,

R. A. DE CASTRO BASTO.

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CADUCEUS

MEDICAL SYMBOL