

Medicine during the american civil war



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Tensions that had long been simmering in the United States finally came to the boiling over point in 1861 the Confederate Army fired on Fort Sumter, thus causing the bloodiest conflict in United States history. Father was pitted against son, brother against brother, and state against state. As with any time of war, medical care is needed and causes medical caregivers to seek answers to new challenges that are thrust upon them. Some of the challenges that these medical professionals dealt with were anesthesia, ambulance service and triage, hospital organization, female nurses, and proper wound care. Often it was the “ heavy and constant demands of the sick and wounded sped up the technological progression of medicine, wrenching American medical practices into the light of modernity” (Dixon, 2018).

The use of anesthesia was quite common during the Civil War with there being more than 800, 000 cases of it used (Goellnitz). The most common form of anesthesia used during the Civil War was chloroform; in fact it, was used 75% of the time, although ether was also used as an anesthetic (Goellnitz). The use of chloroform was preferred because patients reacted quicker to its use and it did not take as much to be useful (Reilly, 2016, p. 141). Interestingly there less than fifty deaths that were linked with the use of anesthesia and since it was fairly light not many realized that it was being used (Reilly, 2016, p. 141).

One of the medical advancements that came from the Civil War was the Ambulance Corps. The Ambulance Corps was revolutionized by Jonathan Letterman, who took over the position of Medical Director for the Army of the Potomac in July 1862 (Grabowski). Before Letterman took over the position of

Medical Director the ambulance services offered to the wounded soldiers was inadequate at best and non-existent at worst. In July 1861, at the First Battle of Bull Run, there were numerous wounded soldiers left on the battlefield to suffer for days (Grabowski). One of the first things that Letterman did was to bring the much needed supplies to where the future fighting was going to be so that less time would be wasted to get a wounded soldier treated (Grabowski).

Jonathan Letterman also created a “ tiered-system of care to evaluate and treat each patient” (Grabowski). This triage system would allow wounded soldiers to receive quicker treatment and a better chance to survive (Grabowski). It was during the Battle of Antietam that the new system was put to the test and it was highly successful with all of the wounded being removed from the battlefield within 24 hours (Grabowski). The triage system had three levels to it which were fatally wounded, wounded non-surgical, and surgical intervention required (Dixon, 2018). Letterman’s ambulance service and triage system proved successful in Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg and they are still the “ basis for our military’s modern network of emergency treatment ... for wounded warriors” (Grabowski).

During the first part of the Civil War, many of the hospitals and medical facilities for wounded soldiers were inadequate at best. These facilities were in whatever type of buildings that could be commandeered such as barns, churches, private homes, among other types of building (Paciorek, 2007). It soon became obvious that larger medical facilities were going to be needed to deal with all of the wounded soldiers, and “ larger general hospitals were

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constructed in major cities ... designed with many wards" (Paciorek, 2007). The building of better medical facilities led to better medical documentation and record taking which helped to speed up the use of proper medical techniques (Dixon, 2018). William A. Hammond, Surgeon General of the Union Army, was responsible for the design, organization, and standardization of many of the new hospitals being built (Dixon, 2018).

At the beginning of the Civil War nurses were mainly volunteers who came and went with no real structure and since there were no nursing schools these nurses lacked any type of medical training. This all changed at the First Battle of Bull Run when "Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix organized a nursing corps to help care for the wounded soldiers" (Stein, 1999). Before the Civil War began the profession of nursing was fairly new and they were mostly men because women were thought to be "too frail to cope with the rigors of administering to the sick" (Stein, 1999). In fact, at the start of the Civil War women were restricted from field hospitals and thus the role of nurses remained solely a male dominated field (Stein, 1999). However, when it became clear that the number of casualties were going to be enormous, gender roles were broken and women from all walks of life, races, religions, marital status, and ages began to quickly volunteer as nurses (Stein, 1999).

Of the roughly 1,264,000 United States soldiers who have given their lives in battle since the origin of the United States, almost half perished because of the Civil War (Battlefields.org). It has been said that "the deadliest thing that faced the Civil War soldier was disease ... for every soldier who died in battle, two died of disease" (Goellnitz). Unsanitary medical practices accounted for many deaths of Civil War soldiers. Two-thirds of the 620,000

deaths in the Civil War “ were not the result of enemy fire, but a force stronger than any army of men: disease” (Dixon, 2018). Unfortunately, most physicians had no “ concept of germs and bacteria or how they spread infection” (Dixon, 2019).

It is often thought that the Civil War “ occurred during the ‘ medical dark ages’, however that is not the complete truth (Paciorek, 2007). When people think of the Civil War, the emancipation of a race of human beings is often at the forefront, but many do not think of the medical advancements that also came from the conflict. It was over the course of the Civil War that medicine began its journey into what it is today. It is difficult to think that it is because of the casualties that were caused by the Civil War that led to many of the medical advancements that are used today.

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