

## Nova et Vetera

### LETTERS FROM THE CRIMEA

It is probably true to say that a century ago first brought to light the necessity for a revision of the medical arrangements in military operations. For the Crimean War, with its muddle-headed planning and red-tape regulations, led to such an enormous loss of combatant personnel that the whole approach to the question of the preservation of health among the fighting men (apart from treating them for wounds) had to be drastically revised. The medical breakdown in that campaign was found by the Royal Commission on the Crimean War to be due to the then existing system and not to the surgeons in the field, who nobly did their utmost for the men under their care despite their lack of drugs, ambulances, proper food, bedding, and nurses. The part played by Miss Nightingale in attempting to deal with the sick and wounded at the Base Hospital at Scutari is well known, but perhaps not so much attention has been given to the surgeons on the battlefield.

A remarkable collection of old letters written by a young assistant surgeon from Balaclava Hospital, and from the camps before Sebastopol between November, 1854, and February, 1856, shows vividly the terrible difficulties under which they laboured.<sup>1</sup> Men with cholera, dysentery, fever, and the wounded were all mixed together without beds or bedding, and the sick lay on the muddy floor in their own clothing. There were no nurses, but two old soldiers, untrained, acted as orderlies and attempted to look after the needs of the patients; they were chiefly engaged in burying the dead rather than looking after the living.

According to the Medical Code the surgeon in charge had to draw up a daily diet rota for his patients despite the fact that the items he specified simply did not exist. These records had to be kept to satisfy regulations, and it was largely because of protest against the absurdity of this procedure that the writer of the letters was sent up to the front, where he encountered such appalling conditions that he wrote:

"We are all overworked, and the men are in fact dying from fatigue and bad food. It is a great shame that we have such bad food. They give us salt pork or beef, in which there is but little nourishment, five days out of six, and then the fresh meat is what no one would eat in England, this with hard biscuit is all we have to live on except some green unground coffee, and rum. Fancy a poor fellow coming home having been twelve hours in the trenches, cold and perhaps wet through—he has first to get a fire to cook his meat, and make some exceedingly bad coffee, and finally to sleep in a damp tent on the ground with one or at the most two blankets. Can you wonder at this being enough to kill any man however strong? And I have rather underdrawn the picture. We are sadly deficient in medicines and medical comforts."

#### Sad Havoc

To a late fellow student at St. Thomas's Hospital he wrote on December 22, 1854:

"I have not seen very much surgery yet, for as soon as a man is wounded he is shipped off to Scutari if he can bear the journey. I was saying to Hawkins the other day that it was very provoking not to know the end of one's cases. He replied, 'Oh, do you see those mounds of earth over there?—that's the end of all the cases!' Which is true, for if a man is too much hurt to be sent to Scutari he almost always dies up here—a tent not being the best place for a man with a bullet through his chest. Disease is making sad havoc amongst our troops; medicine is of little or no use, it is the provisions that are the cause of it. We lose at least 500, and I should think 1,000 men a week from disease; they are sent to Scutari and never seem to return."

<sup>1</sup>The letters quoted were written by Surgeon Lieutenant-Colonel E. M. Wrench, F.R.C.S., who was apprenticed at the age of 14 to St. Thomas's Hospital in 1847. Some of his Crimean reminiscences appeared in the *British Medical Journal*, 1899, 2, 205, and 1908, 2, 388.

And on January 1, 1855:

"Last week I had two letters from Scutari—the first was from a man who had *not* been out here, he described it as very uncomfortable, and a horrid place; the other was from Hervey Ludlow who *has* been out here and sent to Scutari invalided—he writes that it is a sort of Paradise compared to Balaclava. Now you must understand that we consider Balaclava a place where men live well and are able to keep themselves dry, and have no trench work—so from this you can perhaps gather what an enviable situation the Camp is. Four weeks ago all the Regiments in this, the 3rd Division, had their full compliment of Assistant Surgeons, and now few have more than one, the rest have all knocked up.

"The treatment of disease is very much simplified out here as we only have about five drugs, they are—Morphia, Quinine, Dover's Powder, Tartarized Antimony, and Calomel: sometimes we get a little Opium, but it soon goes. We have no tea, arrow-root, or any other thing thought to be indispensable in a London Hospital. . . . now, fancy with things in this state having to treat bad cases of dysentery, fever, frostbite, gunshot wounds, etc.—it is all but impossible, you would say; at all events it is most disheartening, especially when you consider we have no nurses, and most men are covered with vermin.

"I called in to see a friend living a few tents from me, a young Assistant Surgeon named Erskine, who is ill. I found him dreadfully weak with nothing to eat but salt pork. I had fortunately bought some Essence of Beef when last in town in case I should fall ill myself; this I gave to him with some preserved milk. I hope he will get better for he is a nice fellow, but it is awful work falling sick up here, the Authorities seem to have no feeling, and have a particular aversion to allowing Surgeons to go to Scutari as they are so much wanted up here.

"Last night in my Brigade we could not muster 900 men out of three Regiments each of which came out 1,000 strong. My duty has been very unpleasant as I often have to decide whether some 60 men are shamming or really fit to go to their duty. If at home they would all have been in the Hospital weeks ago, but I am often obliged to send them to duty with a harsh word when I feel inclined to cry for the poor fellows—such is War."

#### Rotten Arrangement

On January 24, 1855, he wrote:

"There is still an immense deal of sickness, but I don't think it is increasing much—to-day we have neither Quinine, nor Opium, very useful in dysentery. The Medical Department have no power and is quite dependent on the Commissariat—Government seeming to think a corrupt clerk is more to be trusted than a Surgeon. . . . the whole arrangement is rotten in the extreme."

In June, of the trench work, he wrote:

"It's all very well to call Doctors 'Non-combatants,' but when they stand a better chance of getting shot than almost anyone else—they being obliged to run about from one end of the works to the other—I think they ought to have some credit for it, but we are an ill used race, and therefore can't expect it."

As an example of the muddle of those days:

"Lord Raglan wrote to Smyrna the other day for 12,000 leeches; they came up in stoppered bottles, and were therefore all dead. You may think it strange Dr. Hall had not got some long ago (so do I), I suppose he thinks they, like Chloroform, are unnecessary."

This reference to chloroform, which was but recently invented, was due to the famous memorandum issued by the Director-General condemning its too frequent use because it was considered the cries of the patient undergoing an operation were an indication to the surgeon of the absence of syncope, and that pain had a stimulant effect which assisted recovery.

As a result of public reaction to these scandals, as well as of the tremendous advances made in medicine, dietetics, and transport, the loss of life in later wars due to disease and neglect has been much reduced. Wars are always cruel, and it is the pride of the medical and nursing professions that they give of their best service to the alleviations of the sufferings of the fighting men. Nevertheless the unnecessary and gross loss of life of a century ago due to autocratic inefficiency is a reminder of the heroic efforts then initiated to overcome indifference.