

IB Subject: History

TOPIC: Civil War Medicine

RESEARCH QUESTION: How did medical techniques and/or practices differ between the Union and Confederate forces during the American Civil War (1861-1865) and what kind of impact did they have on the development of modern medicine?

- I. Confederate Medicine: the difficulty of care in an “invaded and blockaded” country
  - A. A significant medical problem that was faced by Confederate doctors was lack of training and/or experience in military medicine, surgery, and preventive medicine.
    1. Up until around the 1830s, most medical doctors received their education from Northern schools; however, several Southern schools were eventually established and soon challenged their Northern counterparts.
    2. By present standards, most doctors were not incredibly prepared to practice. Many began their career without having observed a single operation.
    3. Doctors often relied on instinct and medical journals rather than using prior medical knowledge and/or advancements.
  - B. Disease plagued Confederate soldiers and was a major part of a Confederate doctor’s career.
    1. Various illnesses ultimately took the lives of at least 150,000 Southern soldiers.
  - C. Southern medical care was characterized by a lack of transportation and access to supplies.
    1. Often, ambulances were not readily available or were blocked by Union armies who infiltrated the Eastern South and Tennessee.
    2. The blockade denied many types of supplies that weren’t indigenous to the South and were needed by Southern physicians.
    3. Southern physicians often relied heavily on indigenous plants and medicines.
  - D. The organization of hospitals and roles of medical staff had to be altered greatly to fit the growing needs of the war.
- II. Union Medicine: lots of resources and bodies, little organization
  - A. The Union doctors commonly faced new and dangerous conditions in the South that forced them to reform their system of field hospitals and treatment.
  - B. As surgeon general, William Hammond set into motion several motions that would greatly improve Union quality of care.
    1. Extensive recording was required from hospitals and surgeons to ensure adequate care.
    2. The number of hospitals grew greatly and tools and medical books became more available and widespread in their use.
  - C. The Union Army had the advantage of more doctors and volunteers, as well as more access to ambulances and quick medical care; however, their practices were comparable to the Southern inexperience.

- III. Common obstacles: Lack of experience, lack of knowledge
  - A. Although the Civil War was known for its advanced technology and weaponry, it was also known as the end of the “Middle Ages” for medicine.
    - 1. As previously mentioned, those who graduated with doctoral degrees often did not meet typical standards that would be required in today’s medical field.
  - B. Medical advancements and tools were highly ignored, and progress was slow in making new discoveries.
    - 1. Anesthesia had been in use for years in the medical field, but little was known about infection or how to treat it.
  - C. Disease was considered to be the “third army”.
    - 1. Lack of hygiene in field hospitals and proper treatment of tools and wounds allowed disease to spread quite easily.
  - D. Due to a lack of doctors and increasing number of the wounded, “quick care” was encouraged rather than “quality care”.
- IV. Significant figures and advancements
  - A. Dr. Jonathan Letterman helped to design a more effective and useful ambulance system.
    - 1. Letterman allowed for ambulances to have more standard supplies/commodities and for their crews to have better training.
    - 2. His improvements greatly helped the Union army and allowed the ambulance corps to further develop; his ideas also paved the way for emergency medicine and the 911 system.
  - B. William A. Hammond was responsible for a more organized hospital system.
    - 1. Hammond created new standards for inspection of hospitals and good hygiene practices.
    - 2. Hammond also introduced the better ventilated pavilion style hospitals.
  - C. The formation of the Sanitary Committee, which supported the relief of soldiers, helped to pave the way for other organizations such as the Red Cross.

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