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SPECIAL REPORT

OF THE

Chief of Bureau of Medicine and Surgery,

ON THE

DIFFICULTY OF OFFICERING THE MEDICAL CORPS OF THE NAVY,  
ITS CAUSES AND THE REMEDY.

In the report of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, for the present year, I have been compelled to call attention to the difficulty of officering the Medical Corps of the navy, and I now ask leave, respectfully, to point out what I think to be the causes of the difficulty, and to suggest the remedy.

The chief difficulty lies in the fact that the usages of the naval service and the want of proper legislation place medical men in the navy below the average respectability of the profession in civil life. Individual respectability being the same in both cases, the position of respectability which is obtained in civil life from popular approbation, can only be secured in military life by legislative enactment, and is known under the term of Medical Staff rank, when applied to medical men. I shall not present any views in the interest of any class or section in the navy, but only such as seem to me to be essential to the good of the whole navy, so far as the medical corps is related to that good.

My aim will be to set forth in this report only those general principles and elements which make Medical Staff rank a law of necessity in military service, and define the limits of that necessity. Having presented the principles, the responsibility of their application rests with those who, also, having the welfare of the service at heart, have the power of controlling it.

An analysis of these principles will show that they have the force of natural and moral laws, from which there is neither

escape or evasion. All experience, little and great, proves that any agreements or compromises which endeavor to avoid the full demands of principles, no matter how sincere or unanimous the agreement may be, end only in disappointment, confusion, and continued agitation, destructive of the prosperity and usefulness of the community in which the attempts are made. In our great national convulsion we had an illustration of that fatal experiment with all its stupendous results, only proving the power of a truth universally existing.

Efforts to ignore instead of utilizing as a power, the strongest influences of human nature, or to satisfy them by putting shadowy forms for substantial rights, have agitated our naval service from its beginning. They have interfered much, not only with its efficiency, but also with that harmony which among gentlemen of equal social position, cultivation, and refinement, might be some compensation for the exactions and dangers which belong to the naval service, and are shared together.

It is a subject of much regret, and perhaps of reproach, that the United States naval service alone should continue the agitation of failing experiments, while every other military service in the world has reached harmony and efficiency, by a full acknowledgment of the principles of Medical Staff rank.

That gentlemen of all ages, and with every variety of mental endowment and moral discipline, embraced by the medical corps, have, with unbroken unanimity, from generation to generation, and despite the discouragements of failure, still contended unflinchingly for the protection of staff rank, proves that the claim embodies a life and dignity which no unmeaning vanity could assume or persistingly maintain.

The principles of staff rank are simple, clear, and broad; among them is the important question which has invoked the most persistent contests in history, for it is the same in fact, whether religion, birth, race, or profession is recognized as a disqualifying characteristic, and made the subject of depressing legislation.

The overthrow of such class obstruction in communities or institutions, is a measure of civilization and progress. Such discriminating legislation exists in regard to the medical profession, so long as the members of that profession in the naval service are excluded from those routine honors which are secured to officers of the line, not as special distinction for special merit, but as a reward for the dangers which line and staff equally

encounter, and a testimonial to the fidelity of service which both equally render.

The first practical object of all legislation and regulation relative to the Medical Corps, is to secure for the officers and men of the navy the best average medical skill and ability which our country, or, indeed, any country, can afford; for, in the shrinking of our own people from the naval service, we have been indebted to the aid of able foreigners. Those who encounter naval hazards are entitled to the most capable medical and surgical aid; the Government also has a pecuniary and natural interest in providing every security for the efficient physical and moral ability of those whom it educates and employs.

One other consideration, demanding a high order of professional ability, is incident to our influence among the peoples of the world, and found in the fact that the Medical Officers of the navy come in contact with the professional men of other countries and other navies, therefore national self-respect should require the naval Medical Corps to be especially of such a character as would, in such circumstances, honorably represent their country. It is certain none of these requirements can be met unless the Government offers to medical men such inducements to enter its service as will compete with the fair hopes and inducements of civil life, and be some compensation for their surrender, which is largely made, of that personal liberty and privilege which, under other circumstances, are the natural right of every adult.

The medical men who, by the ability and devotion of their professional labors in civil life, have earned rank and honorable distinction from their fellow-men, are those who should form the standard by which to measure the official rank of naval medical men, because none who would not present a fair promise of reaching honorable positions in civil life should be in the naval service.

All these essential considerations are embraced by a memorial signed, in 1816, by a majority of those distinguished captains, among them such names as Bainbridge, Hull, Rogers, Trenchard, Jones, and Warrington, whose deeds made their own fame and the glory of our navy in the war of 1812, and expressed in the following words:

“We feel it, therefore, as a duty incumbent on us to state that we consider the Medical Department of such great importance

the navy of our country that no reasonable measures ought to be omitted which could have a tendency to retain in the service the professional ability of those gentlemen who, by their experience, knowledge, zeal, and humanity have procured the esteem and confidence of those with whom they have been associated; and we also beg leave to express our belief that no reasonable inducements would be objected to by Congress to procure for those who are engaged in a perilous service, and who are constantly exposed to the diseases of all climates, the best medical aid which the country affords. To effect this, it must be obvious that the rank and pecuniary emolument of Medical Officers ought to bear some proportion to what gentlemen of professional eminence would be entitled in private life."

These conditions being true, the next practical question is, what routine naval rank would measure the social status and respectability of medical men who have earned rank, honors, and respectability from the opinion of their fellow-men. It ought to be borne in mind that those who withdraw themselves from the field of popular approbation to enter the Government service, should be encouraged to look for approval of the Government as a substitute for that which they have relinquished, and it is respectfully suggested that the Government has an implied obligation not to disappoint these just hopes of faithful servants.

Both in civil and military life, the best incentive to duty, outside of a conscientious conviction of duty, is the hope of the approval of that judgment or authority under which life is lived and duty done. In this hope the Government has a large power to secure, by a just distribution of its honors, a high order of professional ability and character, and to substitute a cheerful and proud performance of duty for the cheerless and despondent spirit which now overshadows the senior officers of the Medical Corps who are fixed in the service, and has almost annihilated the junior branches of the corps. No young men who are competent to pass the modern examinations of the naval board are seeking admissions to the navy, and those who were successful in entering are rapidly escaping from it.

There have been fifty-three resignations among the Medical Officers for the last four years from a corps of two hundred; but one of them discreditably to the officer, and only one of them has been filled, and it is impossible now properly to officer the ships and hospitals.

These losses are greatly to be deplored, as many of these young officers had the experience of the war, and had displayed eminent ability, and, should the proper remedy be now applied, it will be years before the loss can be recovered.

The administration of a naval medical charge requires an education of its own, only to be acquired practically on ship-board, embracing the subjects of pensions, malingering, nautical hygiene; and as the officer advances in the service, and has his sphere of duties enlarged, having charge of our large hospitals and medical charge of squadrons, they become administrative as well as professional, and have within them the direction of large fiscal interests, requiring intelligence, experience, and probity.

The losses we have sustained, and the existing aversion to the naval service, are the natural and inevitable results of the infraction of the laws I have endeavored to point out. If the Medical Corps is not honorably and efficiently maintained by a just share of the routine honors of the navy, it can only be done by lowering the standard and taking men who will accept professional humiliation as a means of livelihood.

I respectfully submit that a high protective rank is essential to proper military subordination. Men are thrown arbitrarily in the naval service into the relations of commander and subordinate, without respect to those qualities which, in civil life, might change the relation; therefore, all subordinate officers should have the guarantee that their subordination is not to be made the measure of personal inferiority, an application which the young in authority, or those otherwise of defective judgment, are too apt to make in all institutions. It needs no argument to show the superior efficiency of that cheerful and willing subordination, which is rendered under the guarantee that it implies no personal humiliation, and that reluctant and contestant obedience which naturally results from a suspicion that it marks individual and personal inferiority.

It will scarcely be asserted that any military organization can exist without a Staff Corps, nor will it be denied that the efficiency of the organization is proportioned to the ability of the Staff Corps. This fact is evident from the term used, meaning a sustaining power.

It is proved by the prominence given Staff Corps by all the military heroes of history, and by the high rank given Staff Officers in every perfect military institution. No such institu-

tion can rise above the depressing weight of an inferior Staff Corps.

The commissioned officers of line and staff on the active list in the United States navy are numerically equal, or nearly so, there being six hundred and eighty-eight line officers, and six hundred and twenty staff, of which the Medical Officers make one-third.

It is, therefore, evident that one-half of a body cannot be isolated from the whole in its deterioration, but all must rise or fall together.

Therefore, the substantial question is, what measure will give to the naval service Medical Officers of such skill, capacity, and character as are required for the performance of their professional, nautical, military, and administrative duties? As the field placed under the observation of naval Medical Officers is very extensive, it would seem to be a judicious political economy to secure men of such ability as could utilize it for the benefit of science and humanity.

Whatever is done, it is clear should be done in so earnest and significant a manner as to have a substantial meaning. Better that no rank whatever be given than a rank in words, to be nullified in practice, or made to have only an exceptional use. Such a hybrid combination is barren of all fruitfulness. Why, for instance, should it be said that any class of officers should have such a rank, but not its indications and honors, unless the occupation of the officer works stain and corruption to the honor he has earned? Better say frankly, the service rendered merits the honor, but the occupation is beneath it. Why should the rank of a Medical Officer in our naval service be made to yield to that of a junior line officer, unless that line officer be in the position of command?

Such restrictions effectually nullify the meaning of all rank, and are not necessary to subordination; they multiply causes of confusion, set up rival authorities, of varying and undefined jurisdiction, embarrass the performance of duty, and suggest contempt for the rank they vitiate. It would be an offence to the good sense and ability of any commanding officer to suppose that, with all the authority and physical power entrusted to him, he could not preserve the subordination of the Staff Officers of his command. There is probably no line officer who will admit that

he could be so powerless, especially when, in addition to his own authority, he would have the good judgment and sense of duty of the Staff Officers themselves, inclining them to subordination.

The commission which each Medical Officer holds from the President and Senate of the United States is the same as that given to the most exalted officer of the service. In both it reposes "special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities" of the officer named, and "all officers, seamen, and marines are charged and required to be obedient to his orders" in his special vocation.

No authority has a right or a reason to have less trust in the patriotism, honor, and fidelity of a naval officer, because he is of the medical profession, than is avouched by the President and Senate of the United States, and no officer with prudent and discreet modesty can claim to be of a specially appointed and holier priesthood of patriotism.

Medical equality with all other officers may be relied upon for that fidelity to their oath of office, which makes them obedient to the laws. In their combined relations as citizens of the republic, representatives of a large and honorable profession, and officers of the navy, none can have a greater interest in the prosperity of the service to which they belong, or a more sensitive regard for the honor of their country.

It is much to be feared that this subject, like many others, has been obscured by the tendency of men's minds to take the long usage of a wrong as an argument for its continuance.

As some testimony to the truth of the views I have offered, and also that they do not originate in a spirit of professional partizanship, I am able to refer to the late Admiral Foote as very much dissatisfied with the existing condition of the Medical Corps, and as an earnest advocate for giving it high staff rank. It was by his advice that the Navy Department gave the Staff Corps, as a war acknowledgment, that increase of rank which has recently been pronounced invalid for want of legislation. Also, I have the authority of a distinguished rear-admiral, now on the active list, for saying, after severe comment upon the position of senior Medical officers in the United States Navy, that, in his opinion, "the fleet-surgeon should be in our service, as in the French, exclusively a member of the Commander-in-Chief's Staff and family."

If the authorities who control this subject could be influenced by such liberal views as these, there would be no difficulty in honorably officering the Medical Corps, and class dissensions would end.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

W. M. WOOD,

*Chief of Bureau.*

Hon. GEORGE M. ROBESON,

*Secretary of the Navy.*