

Healthcare Amidst Adversity  
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Life in the Civil War era was brutal, as it was riddled with disease and warfare. Although contemporary medical practices are incomparable to procedures during the 1800s, the effort should be greatly appreciated, as its contribution has led to modern-day medical advances. The Doctor's Bag is just a small glimpse of the limitations a Civil War medical professional was subjected to due to inadequate supplies and knowledge. Notwithstanding the restrictions, these individuals were able to perform painful, life-saving procedures. The Doctor's Bag represents the resiliency of healthcare workers during the Civil War era by working on patients in perilous conditions, attempting to save lives in spite of insufficient knowledge of the physiology and pathology of the human body, and having a genuine regard for human life despite scarce resources.

During the 19th century, the need for areas to treat sick and wounded individuals were exceptionally high. The influx of patients overwhelmed the healthcare workers, as the space to house and treat the patients was regularly reaching its capacity. Thus, the introduction of makeshift hospitals erupted. There were many more patients than there were hospitals or staff, so peoples' homes and facilities were turned into emergency hospitals. For instance, the Fairfax Seminary, initially had a mere fourteen students; however, during the war, it became a storage center for injured servicemen (Nixon). They were unsystematically organized, so treating patients only added to its hecticness. Further, hospitals were built in close proximity to warzones, so medical professionals repeatedly put their lives at risk to help people. Additionally, medical workers implemented an ambulance system to gather wounded soldiers in the field. Although the system was disordered, medical staff were learning from their mistakes and were constantly improving and innovating. The Doctor's Bag portrays the dedication and selflessness healthcare

workers possessed as they voluntarily worked on patients in dangerous and unsanitary places. Since the impromptu hospitals were created so quickly, they were evidently not prepared for the overcrowding, which promoted insanitation. The places were so contaminated that a person was "...twice as likely to die of one of these diseases contracted in camp than from an injury sustained in the field" (Flannery 42). Even though diseases were rampant during this time, medical staff were continuously putting their health at risk to care for the copious amount of ill patients. This artifact reflects the man-made and environmental struggles people in the Civil War era experienced. Medical workers were quite courageous as they jeopardized their lives to help others by surrounding themselves with gunfire and illness with minimal understanding of its effects.

The knowledge needed to successfully treat patients was primitive. The staff had one objective, and it was to tend to the sick despite not grasping the idea of infection and poisoning. Doctors would try their utmost best in pressing situations and prescribe medicines that were unfortunately harmful. Calomel was a popular treatment for a variety of problems including dysentery. The substance contained mercury, and physicians were unaware of its toxicity even though hundreds of people began "...developing tooth loss, digestive problems, and even brain damage" (Civil War Academy). Nonetheless, there was the use of chloroform, which was used as an anesthetic for amputations. This medicine was exceedingly valuable, and many doctors carried it in their bag since amputations were the predominant surgery being performed. Unfortunately, mortality rates were remarkably high as the use of antiseptics and antibiotics were nonexistent. "Approximately two-thirds of the estimated 620,000 soldiers who lost their lives during the war were victims of disease" (Schroeder-Lein 13). While treating patients, medical workers' hygiene etiquette was absent; physicians dropped surgical instruments and would rinse

them in bloody water, used old, contaminated sponges saturated in blood, and wore attire that was covered in biological substances (Goellnitz). Moreover, medical training was not as extensive as it is now, so most knowledge was attained by experience. Ultimately, the lack of information led to a substantial number of deaths. The requirements were low, and medical school was much shorter. Most practitioners understandably were berated for their alleged cruelty and malice, as the probability of dying increased when an individual received treatment. However, medical professionals had the best intentions to alleviate suffering, albeit the tools and knowledge they had were not up to par. The Doctor's Bag signifies the inevitable tribulations people endured when medical research was in its infancy. Even though they lacked appropriate knowledge, their willpower to help those dying prevailed. Healthcare workers tried their absolute best to comprehend the obscurity of biology with no prior information and treat people with a multitude of limitations on supplies.

The Civil War was a tumultuous event. The resources needed to feed, house, and treat soldiers were seemingly disappearing before the eyes of many. There were not enough people or rooms despite many men and women volunteering. The allocation of materials was not efficient because the supplies many high-ranking military officials requested were never delivered or available (Wright). In addition to treating patients with injuries from combat and unpreventable diseases, medical staff also had to treat nutritional deficiencies. This only added to the intense workload. The rationing of food only inhibited ill patients from getting well since their bodies were not healthy from the beginning. Salt was an essential mineral for consumption, so when the resource depleted, it affected the food (Wright). Thus, they had a poor diet. Furthermore, the number of tools needed to treat patients was also not in abundance. Workers would reuse items and increase the spread of diseases. Healthcare professionals did not have a lot to work with, but

they did what they could in such a distressing time. The Doctor's Bag depicts the gallant men and women that sacrificed many things to save those who were sick and utilized every possible resource to the best of their ability.

Living in a time when war completely controls the lives of many is troublesome. People were encircled in a ring of death, and there was no way for one person to stop it. Healthcare workers inhaled and exhaled mortality, yet their tenacity became transparent when it came to saving lives. The Doctor's Bag demonstrates the perseverance of medical professionals during the despairing Civil War by being willing to treat patients while endangering their own lives, eagerly waiting to help people despite having little knowledge about microbes and human biology, and caring enough about people to aid them even though there was an increasing shortage of supplies. Their valiant effort may have not been enough to save thousands of lives then, but it did revolutionize the medical community in years to come.

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