

6: Nursing during the First World War



Photograph of the interior of an ambulance train

27th April 1918, Second Lieutenant David McLellan (photographer) © IWM (Q 8749)

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The passengers on board this train are wounded soldiers, cared for by military nurses, watched by army officers. The First World War placed heavy demands on nursing services, and nurses worked closer to the front line than they ever had before in wartime.

Ambulance trains carried wounded soldiers from the front lines to hospitals. Casualties could spend many hours on board. It usually took about two hours to 'load' a train at a casualty clearing station, and then between six and 36 hours to travel to the base.

The trains sometimes took days to reach their destinations, but patients were glad to sleep, even in cramped bunks. By the summer of 1915, even very complex procedures such as antiseptic wound irrigation could be performed – albeit with difficulty, and, on upper-bunks, requiring quite 'acrobatic' techniques – by transport nurses.

Nursing duties

Nurses worked on the front lines in casualty clearing stations, field hospitals and base

hospitals. They rehydrated patients, prepared them for surgery and dressed their wounds.

Nurses also combated illnesses caused by trench life: trench foot, dysentery and typhus fever.

The College of Nursing

Thousands of women volunteered to help meet demand for nurses during the war. They joined the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) run by the British Red Cross, and received only six week's training in first aid. The VADs lacked the experience and training nurses had, yet were often referred to as nurses.

Standards in nurse training were unregulated at this time, and the rising number of VADs with little training caused uncertainty amongst nurses, concerned about their profession. Sarah Swift, Matron in Chief of the British Red Cross, joined forces with politician Arthur Stanley to propose a college for nursing, to set standards in nurse education and training. In 1916 the College of Nursing was established.

Activity

Nursing duties included preparing and assisting patients for surgery, and keeping wounds clean and dressed in clearing stations, on board trains and ships and in make-shift or temporary hospitals. Consider what role nurses would

have played in developments in either (a) blood transfusion or (b) plastic surgery during the First World War. How would the environment affect the way nursing care before, after or during an operation?

Fact: In 1946 the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) became the first women's organisation to be granted a coat of arms featuring a shield. The shield represents military service, in recognition of the Royal College of Nursing's role during the world wars.