

Shocking attitudes to Great War's wounded revealed

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Diaries written by working class soldiers wounded in World War One have revealed how they silently endured brutal treatment by military nurses, doctors, physiotherapists and stretcher bearers.

Historian Dr Ana Carden-Coyne from The University of Manchester says the material penned by British and Australian squadies explodes an officially sanitised view of military service in the Great War.

Dr Carden-Coyne, who is writing a book on the subject, argues the soldiers privately resisted military medical authorities - many of whom were untrained - using eloquent prose in their diaries and compelling cartoons she found in hospital magazines of the time.

One Australian Private describes in his diary how he felt the need to “keep quiet” when a doctor probed two inches into his leg wound for a piece of loose bone “with all the instruments of torture” including tongs.

And in another, a British patient records his shame when a nursing sister “nearly fell down laughing” after she unbandaged a wounded arm that had suffered severe muscle wastage, because it “looked barely bigger than a child’s”.

One patient penned a poem with a sinister depiction of the surgeon blowing an even larger hole through the entrance of a shell wound.

Though the patient ‘howled like a pup’ and ‘shrieked like an eight inch

howitzer’, ‘Captain Scalpel’ said: “All is well!”.

Another comes to terms with his rough treatment by a physiotherapist by using sexual fantasy in poetry.

Dr Carden-Coyne said: “These journals and cartoons show that the heroic myths of sacrifice popular at the time are rather false: those who were injured fighting for King and Country were poorly cared for.

“Military medical propaganda was about 'how well we care for the wounded' and that is acutely contradicted by this evidence.

“In contrast to the image of ‘good patients’ frequently mentioned in published accounts of medical staff, these soldiers used the form of patient diaries to express their horror and resistance in secret.

“They recorded personal stories of pain and healing with an extraordinary level of detail, were very attached to the diaries and took them seriously.

“Each day they entered information about their wounds, medical staff, treatment, feelings, doubts, complaints about lack of food or sleep and observations about other patients and the staff.

“And there is much evidence here of resistance to the policies and advice of the authorities for example by insisting on vocational training or refusing therapeutic treatments and surgical interventions.

“Some patients asserted their agency by demonstrating knowledge of their medical conditions and taking matters into their own hands.

”These 90-year-old stories resonate strongly today amid the accusations from MPs that the government is no longer honoring the military

covenant, Britain's duty of care to its servicemen and women.”

Dr Carden-Coyne also examined accounts by medical personnel of the experience of stretcher bearers - who regarded wounded men as their patients though medically untrained.

A stark example was when a medic’s rescue party took refuge in a shell hole with their soldier ‘patient’.

Despite the patient’s pain, he tells how one of the other men bullied the patient, haranguing him to keep quiet.

She said: “The diaries record men rebuking others for screaming in pain – for losing control of the body and letting others know of their immediate fear and sense of danger.

“Diary authors recognise their vulnerability to pain and their passivity in being immobile, in being operated upon or having body parts removed whilst powerlessly under anaesthetic, and by being reliant upon others for care.

“Some of the soldiers describe how medical staff applaud soldiers’ ability to endure physical pain ‘without screaming’ but resent emotional responses and patients who resist treatment.”

Source: University of Manchester

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