

Medicine and Nursing in the South African War.

THE ROYAL COMMISSION.

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EVIDENCE OF PROFESSOR ALEXANDER OGSTON, C.M.

Professor Ogston, called and examined, said that his own observation, and conversation with others, led him to the conclusion that the country was only prepared for war to a very limited extent. We had not such an Army Medical Service as would be required in a European war or in such a war as that in South Africa proved to be. The provision of officers and men was quite inadequate. Straining their resources to the uttermost, they probably had provision for about 40,000 of an army, whereas there were a couple of hundred thousand, perhaps, altogether to be provided for. At Modder River, the field hospital accommodation was undoubtedly insufficient, and the provision of officers and men of the Royal Army Medical Corps was very deficient. There was exceeding difficulty in dealing with the sick and wounded both in the convoys and at the hospitals at Modder River. There were on one occasion 800 sick and wounded men brought in in one day. They had to be accommodated in two field hospitals which had only equipment for 100 men each. They were very short of surgeons. On February 24th there were three medical attendants to 400 sick and wounded, some of them typhoid and very badly wounded cases. There should have been four times the number of medical attendants to do anything like justice to them.

There were by no means sufficient hospital orderlies. They were a very fluctuating body. They were attending the typhoid cases, and they were themselves feeling ill and daily dying of typhoid fever, so that they were scarcely constant for one day.

With regard to the quality of the non-commissioned officers and men of the R.A.M.C. the witness said, they "cannot, I think, be accused of any lack of zeal and devotion. The way in which they sacrificed themselves to do what they could was, I think, beyond all words of praise; but they were, many of them, not at all the kind of men who ought to be non-commissioned officers and men in the Army Medical Corps. Many of them came into it untrained from other regiments, and if they received any training there it was merely a little training in first aid and carrying wounded in the field. Many of them—most of them, I should say—were absolutely ignorant of anything like what was required for attending on the sick. They were utterly unaware of how to deal with a sick man, or of what was an absolute necessity for him;

and hence, in spite of all their good will, they failed from the want of this training. There were, of course, exceptions, and some of them were exceedingly good, but they were few. Most of them seemed to have joined, whether they were Regulars or Volunteers, with the idea that their duty would be to go into the field behind an advancing regiment to pick up the wounded, to stop the bleeding, and to carry them to the tents, and then, when they found their duties were nothing so brilliant as that, but consisted in the tedious watching night and day over men who were sick, delirious, and dying, and when their comrades were taken ill daily and dying around them, they often lost heart. It required, in fact, a quiet heroism that very few of them possessed to enable them to carry out their duties, especially in attending on the sick and the fever cases which were very numerous.

"Disinfection, one might say, was absolutely unknown. The men knew nothing about disinfectants; they did not even know which were good and which were bad. They had no training in keeping themselves disinfected; in fact, it seemed to me that many of them looked upon it as a species of cowardice if they attended to such things as avoiding infection—a sort of shirking of duty. The hands were not disinfected; the utensils that the patients used for typhoid evacuations, and so forth, were not disinfected; when they were emptied out into pits they were not disinfected; and the wards were not disinfected. In one hospital, made to contain fifty-three beds, and which accommodated fifty-three cases, almost exclusively of typhoid, the only source of disinfection for the orderlies was one enamelled basin containing creolin and water, which was placed in the veranda at the exit from the hospital, and this they might or might not use as they thought proper.

"This was not a field hospital; it was a hospital in Bloemfontein. The sick and the typhoid cases were sent down to the base, when they were able to be moved, many of them still suffering from diarrhoea, without any washing or disinfection of their bodies or clothes. Besides the hospital trains, they were sent down in ordinary trains, corridor trains, which were used, of course, on occasion for others; in those cases there was no disinfection whatever attempted, and consequently the disease was very widely spread."

These orderlies also cooked, which again, the witness said, increased the risk if they were not careful about disinfection. He continued:—"One could see some of the orderlies, from lack of knowledge, washing their kettles in filthy puddles, and scraping them with the infected earth around, and although careful instructions were issued to them and posted up in the buildings, wherever a building was available, there was no staff to compel attention

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