

e n q u i r y

What impact did the two World Wars have on medicine in the modern world?

It is estimated that about 20 million people died because of military action in the First World War (1914–18), and another 30 million in the Second World War (1939–1945). These figures do not include the huge number of people who were injured.

Doctors and surgeons in many fields of medicine gave their services to help relieve the sufferings caused by war and the evidence shows that many improvements were made as a result. Many of these developments relied on the research and discoveries made in the nineteenth century.

What medical changes took place during the First World War (1914–18)?

The Armed Forces

Interest in the health of the population in general and the armed forces in particular grew as a result of war.

The general health of the Grand Fleet has been extremely good, indeed, probably better than in times of peace. The average daily percentage of sick in the whole Fleet in 1913 was 2.37%, and in 1914 a little lower, 2.03%. Since the outbreak of war daily sickness in the Grand Fleet has been almost always under 1%. Most of the sickness was of a minor character, such as seasonal influenza and boils.

▲ **SOURCE A** Statement by General H D Rolleston, RN, Consultant Physician to the Royal Navy, to the London Medical Society on 12th February 1917.

The health of Britain's sailors began to improve and this was put down to the following factors:

- Comparative isolation of the fleets leading to less drunkenness and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Quarantine restrictions in drafting men from shore

(they were kept in barracks to be checked for diseases before being allowed back onto the ships).

- Lectures on personal hygiene.
- Measures to remove the effects of boredom such as competitions and cinema films.
- Improvement in the ventilation of ships.

Life-saving technology

William Röntgen had discovered X-rays in 1895 and, soon after, hospitals began to use them to look for disease and broken bones inside the body, but it was during the First World War that they became really important. Mobile X-ray machines were used on the battlefield in France and Belgium so that soldiers with bullet and shrapnel wounds could be treated more quickly and effectively.

Marie Curie realised that X-rays could save soldiers' lives so she temporarily gave up her work at the Radium Institute in Paris and convinced the French government to set up the Red Cross Radiology Service. By October 1914 she had the first of 20 radiology vehicles. These X-ray vans transported the essential equipment to the battlefield and were known by the soldiers as 'Petites Curies' (little Curies).

Blood transfusions had been tried ever since William Harvey had discovered the circulation of blood. They were unsuccessful in most cases but no one knew why until Landsteiner discovered blood groups in 1900. Even then it was not possible to store blood because it clotted so quickly. War injuries led to many men dying from loss of blood and surgical shock. A solution to the problems of storing blood was needed. In 1914 it was discovered that sodium citrate stopped blood from clotting, and during the First World War American army doctor, O.H. Robertson, used this

Readings In Modern Surgery

Richard H. Egdahl, John A. Mannick



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