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978-1-108-02311-5 - A Letter on Sickness and Mortality in the West Indies

Andrew Halliday

Excerpt

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TO THE

RIGHT HON. LORD VISCOUNT HOWICK,

SECRETARY AT WAR.

MY LORD,

WE are indebted to your Lordship's sound judgment and great humanity for the existence of a document which is confessedly of great importance, and calculated, more than any other that has ever yet been made public, to promote the best interests and general welfare of the British Army. I allude to the Statistical Report on the Sickness, Mortality, and Invaliding, among the Troops in the West Indies, as drawn up by Captain Tulloch, and presented to both Houses of Parliament during the last Session. In the introduction to that Report, Captain Tulloch informs us "That in October, 1835, your Lordship deemed it requisite that an inquiry should be instituted into the extent and causes of the sickness and mortality among the troops in the West Indies, with the view of founding thereon such measures as might appear likely to diminish the great loss of life annually experienced in these Colonies." There was no subject of inquiry, I venture to affirm, more worthy of your attention, as an officer of the Crown, nor any one

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connected with your appointment as Secretary at War, that more urgently demanded a most thorough and searching investigation. Other Secretaries at War may have distinguished themselves by their knowledge of accounts, and the excellence of their official regulations—they may have earned praise for bringing into lucid order and regularity the whole system of our Military expenditure, and have framed good general orders for the strict discharge of the Soldier's duty; but, with the exception of your gallant and amiable predecessor—the TRUE SOLDIER, and the Soldier's TRUE FRIEND—Sir Henry Hardinge, I do not recollect any one, during the last forty years, who made the health or the happiness of the human being the subject of due consideration. Your Lordship, however, has now commenced this good work, and I trust you will cause it to be continued, until you are indeed able to found thereon such measures as may effectually diminish the great loss of life annually experienced in our West India and other Colonies.

It is to be most sincerely regretted that some officer in the medical department of the army was not deemed worthy of being recommended to your Lordship, as capable of discharging those duties which were assigned to Captain Tulloch. It has tended much to lower the department, already sufficiently low in the estimation of the public, and must prove most disheartening to every member of that department, to find a military subaltern earning promotion by the performance of a task that most especially belonged to the medical officer. Army medical men have now but few opportunities of earning either praise or promotion in or out of their depart-

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ment, and it shows but little zeal in their behalf, that they were passed over on this occasion. There are still many individuals connected with the Army Medical Department who are as able as Captain Tulloch, and not less willing to undertake the examination and condensation of the Medical and War-Office Returns; and some, I venture to assert, as conversant with Statistical details, and as capable of turning them to account, as the gallant captain, or any other military officer whatsoever. I readily allow, notwithstanding, that no man could have more ably fulfilled the duty which your Lordship intrusted to him, than Captain Tulloch has done. His Report is an interesting and invaluable document; and it is only because, as he states, that "it is principally confined to such points as can readily be solved by the test of facts and figures," and "to such matters *only* as can be made the subject of calculation," that I consider it of less importance than it might otherwise have been. A physician practically conversant with West India service, and at the same time a competent arithmetician, might have brought into view many causes of sickness and mortality, that can never be discovered by any accumulation of figures, and to discuss many matters which I firmly believe could never be made the subject of mere calculation.

There may be, and no doubt are, many medical officers more able than I am to discuss the several matters contained in this Report; yet, your Lordship is not quite ignorant of the anxious attention which I have given to the subject, and I feel more than an usual degree of pleasure in believing, as I certainly do, that it was owing to my letters from the West Indies in 1834, that the

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sickness and mortality among the troops in these colonies was forced upon the attention of men in authority, and that the subject was brought more immediately under your Lordship's notice. Every hour that I was allowed to remain in the West Indies was employed in investigating, upon the spot, the assigned or probable causes of the sickness and mortality that prevailed around me. I was then convinced, and still am, that many of the unknown, and most of the obvious and tangible causes of those diseases which are the principal source of mortality, may and can be removed by means fully within our power, and therefore I feel it a duty which I owe to myself, not less than to my fellow-creatures, to call your Lordship's attention to the observations I am now about to offer on Captain Tulloch's Statistical Report.

There was a time, my Lord, when we had on the active staff of the Army men who could and did investigate the causes and the consequences of the diseases which assailed the troops under their superintendence, and were not afraid to publish and support the opinions they had formed, or the treatment they considered necessary for the prevention, not less than the cure, of these diseases; and we had, too, military commanders that would listen to their opinions and seek their counsel; but, now alas, all *writing men* have apparently been excluded from the service. An Army Medical Officer must neither take a pen in his hand, nor open his mouth, except within the walls of the military-hospital.

There are still, I am proud to say, some men of talent, and certainly of great experience, among the medical

officers of the Army; but length of days, and the wear and tear of unhealthy climates, do not generally improve the intellect; and, though a more gentlemanly or better-educated class of young men never existed than the junior officers appointed by Sir James M'Grigor since the peace, yet, what avails talent, if it is not to be appreciated, or experience, or the strongest intellect, if not consulted; or of what account is the best education, if it is not to be encouraged and improved, with at least some chance of reward? When I was in the West Indies, the medical officers had entirely lost cast, and seemed scarcely acknowledged: the commanding engineer had usurped all the rights and privileges of the principal medical officer: the idea of consulting the Inspector of Hospitals about the locality or the construction of a barrack, how much soever it might concern the health of the troops, would have been considered as a condescension out of all question, and even when the general hospital at Barbados was to be rebuilt after the hurricane of 1831, I believe I am correct in stating that the Inspector-General on the spot, Dr. Baxter, was never once asked where it ought to be built, and far less how. The idea of a DOCTOR presuming to offer an opinion as to the best construction of a barrack-room, or even of a sick-ward, was evidently so much out of place, that when I ventured to offer a suggestion during the progress of the building at St. Ann's, I was laughed at.

No man living could show more anxiety for the welfare of the troops in the West Indies than my immediate predecessor Dr. Bone, Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals, nor was any health officer ever at greater pains to inculcate such rules and regulations as his long experience

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had proved to be of importance in preserving their health; but not one of his suggestions was attended to, and some of the most obvious of his recommendations for cleanliness and comfort, and for cooking their unwholesome messes, were never even adverted to by the military authorities.

The late good old Barrack-Master at Barbados, (Colonel Diggins) found out a process by which the most filthy and unfit ingredient then, and still, in use for stuffing the soldiers' palliasses, might be made a most clean and comfortable article of bedding, and twenty times more economical than that in use; and that it was so, was fully certified by Mr. Gunning, the Inspector-General of Hospitals at the time; but as it did not suit the Commissary-General to have any additional trouble imposed upon his department, and because it was recommended by a Doctor—no matter how much the poor soldier might suffer—no matter how often he might be driven to sleep upon the bare boards in the open galleries, or perhaps forced to the grog-shop to escape the myriads of bugs and vermin that were hatched in the stuffing of his palliass, and brought forth in swarms, ready to devour his body—no matter what number of punishments might take place for irregularities in a manner forced upon the unhappy sufferer, or what amount of sickness or mortality might ensue from the soldier finding it impossible to enjoy one moment of rest or of sound sleep—no matter as to all these considerations, the Commissariat routine could not be interfered with; the crude Indian corn husks continued in use up till 1836, and I fear still continue. In this case, my Lord, two lines of a General Order would not only have done away with the nuisance,

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but have saved the lives of many brave men, and preserved the health of more.

I therefore do not hesitate to attribute very much of the sickness that generally prevails, and not a little of the mortality that follows, to that careless indifference as to the common comforts and conveniences of the soldier, which was so evident on West India service; and to that total disregard of all measures of prevention, even when pointed out by the intelligent medical officer.

Another source of the great mortality among our troops in the West Indies, as connected with this branch of the subject, deserves your serious attention, and certainly calls for your Lordship's most decided interference. I here allude to the too often injudicious manner in which the soldiers are treated when attacked with sickness. This arises from the bad organization of the medical department itself. Men are now kept employed upon the staff, when it is well known that both their bodily and mental powers are greatly in abeyance, and who, instead of being able to treat the sick soldiers themselves, or to instruct others how to treat them, are scarcely able to sign the numerous returns their clerks are called upon to make out for the Medical Board Office; and young men, almost immediately on their appointment to the service, are hurried off to the West Indies; and however well educated they may be, or "deep read in the theory of physic," they can have but little practical experience in the treatment of any class of diseases even in Europe, and certainly none of those that are most common within the tropics. And, as it very seldom happens that much time is allowed to the most practised observer to study the

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symptoms of West India diseases at the bed-side of the patient, the physician must gain his knowledge of their treatment by the frequency of their occurrence, and too often acquire experience from the repeated failure of his best endeavours to save his patient. Every inducement therefore ought to be held out, not only to stimulate young men of superior abilities to volunteer for this service, but to encourage them to remain in the West Indies as long as their health and constitutions can withstand the climate. At present there is nothing to be gained by any exertion, no stimulus whatever to acquire distinction. However diligent and observing a man may be, or however much he may sacrifice his health or his ease to cure the epidemic and endemial diseases of the colony in which he may be stationed, the prospect of any reward, or even of any praise, is now almost hopeless; nay, I have actually known zeal procure censure. If a vacancy occurs, the promotion, of late, has almost never been given to the officer on the spot. A fresh man is sent out, who again, in the course of what I may call his apprenticeship, will lose many of the patients that his experienced predecessor would have saved. Disappointed of the reward which he had hoped his zeal and his success might have secured for him, the experienced officer now becomes careless and indifferent, and is only anxious to get removed from so dangerous a climate; while the newly promoted (having nothing to excite his ambition), soon becomes sick himself, or gets tired of the country, and before he has acquired half the experience of the man he has superseded, is employing his days and nights in devising means to get away from it.

When a medical officer, by perseverance and a close



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attention to the symptoms of disease, and the proper effects of remedies in the cases that are so frequent and so fatal in our West India Colonies, has acquired a knowledge of their character, and a success in treating them, I would then say, my Lord, that if the lives of our gallant soldiers are of the least account, the services of such a man are become invaluable—they are beyond all price, and ought undoubtedly to be secured either by some pecuniary reward, or professional promotion. It is not always, I grant, that a medical officer can be rewarded with promotion even in the West Indies; yet, when a vacancy does occur, it ought never to be given out of the command. Above all, your Lordship ought to contrive some means of keeping experienced officers in attendance upon the troops in the Colonies, by allowing them, after certain and fixed periods, to obtain local rank, with the pay and allowances of that rank, while they continue to remain on that service. The officers of the Ordnance, when sent to the West Indies, have what is called climate pay, a considerable addition to their ordinary pay. Why not then give something of the same sort to the medical staff officers, whose duties expose them to a thousand causes of sickness and mortality, that the military officer never has to encounter, and whose services, as I have said, only become valuable by a prolonged stay in the country. Setting aside all considerations of humanity, and even of justice to our gallant army, the question becomes one that may be answered by a reference to figures. Whether is it more economical to expend a few thousand pounds in rewards to experienced medical officers, or to sacrifice the lives of some hundreds of our brave soldiers? Your Lordship, I am satisfied, is not likely to allow any such

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a calculation to be entered upon; and had you not considered the life of a fellow-creature of far more value than any amount of money, you would never have ordered that inquiry which has led to the valuable report now before me.

Next in importance, if not even more important than any considerations connected with the arrangements of the Medical Staff, I would call your Lordship's attention to the great, and I might almost say, criminal negligence of the government, in not providing a sufficient number of Chaplains for the Forces on Foreign Stations. While a regiment continues in Great Britain or Ireland, the men are made to attend divine service regularly at some church or chapel on every Sunday throughout the year; but the moment they are embarked on board ship for Colonial service, all care for their souls' welfare is entirely lost sight of. There is not, in the whole of our West India Possessions, a single church or chapel where a regiment can be assembled to hear the Prayers of the Church read, or the Gospel of Christ preached. There is not even a shed where they can meet to receive any religious or moral instruction. They are literally compelled to live without God in the world; and Sunday becomes of all days the most distinguished for drunkenness and all manner of irregularity, and generally sends more patients to the hospitals than all the other six days of the week. There is, it is true, with the early dawn of every Sunday morning, what is generally, (I had almost said, in mockery,) called a Church Parade. The men are assembled in front of their barracks, exposed to the damp and noxious exhalations from the moist earth, and the slanting beams of the rising sun; when some clergy-