

PPHUNNYBONE

Two Jolly Good Physicians

By Hugh Gibbons

LET'S HEAR IT for military medics present and past – working at a cutting edge of medicine that's difficult for anyone office-bound to imagine.

They've a store of stories. For example, Surgeon Captain Rick Jolly has produced three, well, jolly good reads for anyone - PPs among them.

For bedtime browsing, Jackspeak catalogues the delightfully inventive slang from the Royal Navy and Marines. (You'd be a Plumber or Dick-doc.) For any line manager's bookshelf, In Confidence is a must – Rick's hilarious collection of staff reports. Some are apocryphal: some, close to home. Major B has a resigned look on his face much of the time; I only wish he would put it in writing. Lt X can talk 50% faster than anyone can listen. Sergeant G's lecturing technique is absolutely hypnotic.

And The Red & Green Life Machine is Rick's day-by-day account of military medical people thrust into the heart of battle 30 years ago. Three hundred were involved in the Falklands War. In the field hospital at Ajax Bay – a one-time meat processing unit – they got to address in-your-face air attack injuries: Simon Weston's burns, for example. Within the hour, "...170 injured - standing or lying around."

Both sides decorated Rick. The UK gave him an OBE. Visiting Argentina in 1998, he asked what had become of their casualties his team had treated. As a result, for his compassion, their Government appointed Rick an Officer in their top honour Orden de Mayo.

Hippocrates would have high-fived him.

"I tried to point out that we had not cared for our Argentine patients because of some military command or international convention, but simply because we were human beings who respected life." The Queen personally authorised Rick to wear the insignia "on all occasions" – which he does proudly on behalf of all the British military medics: paramedics, medical and nursing officers.

History is full of respect for military medics, of course. One got a mention in the BMJ in February 1871. Near Hadrian's Wall, a high-quality, touching tombstone put up by comrades says: "To Anicius Ingenuus, Medicus Ordinarius of the First Cohort of Tungrians, who lived for 25 years". Though young, Anicius was probably a qualified doctor with the rank of centurion - like Rick, in a crack unit.

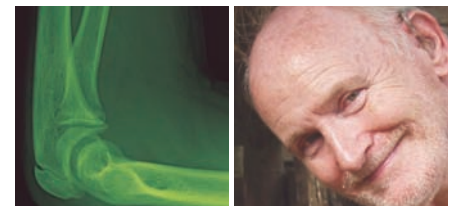
The oldest recorded Medicus was 85, incidentally. Like Rick, he'd have seen it all, in and out of battle. And heard all the old jokes. In Roman cavalry units, doctors turned their hand to equine duties. Castration clamps have been found in camps. "Do they hurt?" "Only if you get your fingers trapped..."

And did ancient armies suffer PTSD from combat, as some psychiatrists assert? Probably not, according to a powerful paper by my friend classics professor Aislinn Melchior. The past really is a very different country.

So on difficult days in the office, spare a thought for all medics at the cutting edge of conflict. Count your blessings. Things could be a jolly sight more bloody.

REFERENCES, FURTHER INFORMATION AND SOME GOOD-HUMOURED GOODIES ARE AT HUGH'S SPECIAL WEBSITE FOR PP READERS, COLLEAGUES, COUNTERPARTS AND ACQUAINTANCES.

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