Research Paper

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1916: the year when military dentistry was created in France

Medical Science

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The war broke out in 1914. It was a profession still in its infancy but which had been legislated since 1892 that got involved in the war. Besides, at the beginning of the war, the dentists were limited to low-ranking roles such as hospital porters or nurses. Like many others, these soldiers stood out for their bravery, too often at the expense of their lives. Jean Piel Melcion d'Arc, who belonged to a Zouave march regiment, "was heroically killed on November 13th 1914 by repelling a German attack who was trying to cross a bridge (the Battle of the Yser)." He was transferred to the Order of regiment (Riaud, 2008).

Adrien Audefroy of the 44th battery from the 28th field Artillery Regiment was then transferred to the Order of the day to the army. "Even though he had been under violent fire for two consecutive days, he succeeded in keeping his nerve and insuring the use of his weapon, giving faith to his men and thus contributing to wreak serious havoc on enemy troops." (Augier, 1986)

On October 15th 1914, a ministerial circular allowed the dental surgeons to be incorporated within the sections of military nurses in order to practise their profession and insure the soldiers' emergency care, but as soldiers. On the same day, the first campaign dental office was created in Clermont-en-Argonne under the supervision of Armand Lévy, the first class physician assistant. On October 30th, numerous petitions for the creation of a dental officer were signed by dentists and dental associations. On November 10th, another circular decreed the opening of three centres of stomatology and maxillofacial prosthetics in Paris, Lyon and Bordeaux, that of the Val-de-Grâce being the first in the capital (Ferret-Dussart, 2004). On December 21st, dental surgeons and technicians, recruited in the health brigades or the troop corps were assigned in the evacuation hospitals. Their mission was to apply special bandages and provisional restraints on the wounded who suffered from facial or maxillary mutilations. Morevover, it was recommended that on the front, qualified dentists could provide soldiers with effective treatment against dental diseases. On December 24th, a new circular allowed "the regional Directors of the Health Service to appeal to volunteers' help to insure the functioning of dental offices in garrisons where they could not find mobilised dentists." (Augier, 1986; Caliot, 1993)

On March 10th 1915, the Official Journal published the decisions of the Higher Consultative Commission of the Health Service but its decisions were not applied immediately. Dental surgeons were appointed in each dental service of the regiment. A dental car, made up of a dental surgeon and a dental technician, was appointed in a troop corps (Riaud, 2008). Dental surgeons without assignments were part of the contingent of military nurses. On April 14th, the Minister for the War Alexandre Millerand sent an official letter in which he accepted the cooperation of the dental school of Paris to provide soldiers with health care. On May 10th, the cooperation of the Relief Committee for the soldiers with maxillary and facial wounds was approved by the same minister. On June 11th, the school had to provide a 200-bed ambulance for the soldiers whose faces had been mutilated. The convalescent hospital of the "Lycée Michelet" in Vanves created this ambulance and the dental school of Paris provided the service with human and material resources (Konieczny, 1992). On July 1st,

Justin Godart became Under-Secretary of State for the Health Service. On July 31st, he visited the first dental car. On the same day, Godart issued a circular which stipulated that the edentulous soldiers were to be fitted with devices within 15 to 20 days. On August 25th, Justin Godart visited the hospital of the "Lycée Michelet" in Vanves, the local center of the Dental school of Paris. Confronted with the self-denial of these men, some newspapers were concerned about the lack of dentists within the stomatology teams (Petit Journal (20/08/1915), France de demain (21/08/1915) and L'Humanité (29/08/1915). On August 31st, Godart summoned the head of the Dental school of Paris and asked him to write a report for the creation of a dental service and a proper army dental surgeon. Godart received the report on September 9th of the same year (Georges Villain wrote it). On September 13th, Justin Godart visited the school (Augier, 1986; Caliot, 1993).

On February 26th 1916, the War minister Joseph Galliéni demanded the creation of an army dentist to the then President of the French Republic Raymond Poincaré. On the same day, in a decree issued on February 26th published in the Official Journal on March 3rd, Poincaré created an army dental surgeon corps throughout the war. On February 27th, Godart specified that they would be 1 000, as warrant officers. Their clothing was similar to that of the adjutant nurses with a silver caduceus. On it, was a letter D of 1cm high. They were affiliated to the Ministries of the Armed Forces and Interior and supervised by the chief physician of their unit. They wore the armlet, as intended by the Convention of Geneva signed by the French on September 22nd 1864 (Riaud, 2008). In January of the same year, Blatter, the president of the National dental federation (FDN in French), and Villain, its secretary, met Admiral Lacaze, the Minister of the Navy, to create an army dental corps within the Navy. On March 1st, Lacaze sent a report to the President of the Republic asking him the creation of a "naval dental surgeon" (Konieczny, 1992). Poincaré immediately agreed. Naval dentists were integrated to the medical assistants with the same clothing and badges.

As soon as the decrees were issued, the National dental federation promptly sent the texts to the French dental surgeons in a letter dated March 3rd. On March 4th, the Official Journal issued a decree which pointed out that the Minister of the Navy, Admiral Lacaze, was allowed to recruit dental surgeons to assist the Navy physicians who supervised them. Another decree issued on the same day ordered all the dentists who were not officers to be assigned in the nursing sections. On June 9th, the ministerial direction on stomatology services, #8119 3/7, a genuine charter for dental officers, established in a sufficiently detailed and complete manner the organisation of the surgical and maxillofacial prosthetic rehabilitation units, of the edentulous centers and garrison dental offices (Augier, 1986; Caliot, 1993).

On the same year, another event was held in Paris: the Inter-Allied Dental Congress. The meetings of November 9th and 13th were devoted to demonstrations and communications which focused on the treatment of maxillary fractures and notably of the lower jaw. The visits of the various services and different trainings in Paris which dealt with maxillofacial prosthetic rehabilitation took place from November 14th to 18th. The general meeting was held on November 13th at the dental school of Paris, at 45, rue de la Tour d'Auvergne (Riaud, 2008). The members

could attend an extremely comprehensive exhibition about various casts, temporary or permanent supportive devices, braces, jaw blocking devices and expansion devices in the case of various trismus, labial and buccal atresia. Justin Godart, the Under Secretary of State for the Army Health Service, presided over the formal sitting. Georges Villain was the organiser. He also published the proceedings of the Congress in 1917. They were made up of two volumes, 1 600 pages and 1 100 figures. Villain published them within less than a year without neglecting his different responsibilities. At the end of the seminar, the participants unanimously applauded Villain. This congress was a great success (Augier, 1986; Caliot, 1993).

From 1917, dental schools organised prosthetic centers for ambulatory patients by liaising with military hospitals and stomatology units. On March 10th, Godart decreed that soldiers and non-commissioned officers should receive free braces. On April 7th, the regimental dentists were born. At the end of 1917, 50 dental officers were counted. On July 3rd, a circular informed dentists that they would receive all the necessary equipment from September 1st (Augier, 1986; Caliot, 1993).

On February 8th, Godart left office acclaimed by the National dental federation. Mourier replaced him. On March 8th, a bill was introduced for the creation of dental officers. It was introduced to the Chamber of Deputies on behalf of the Minister of Finance and the War Minister. On October 20 th 1918, the law was published in the Official Journal. A dental officer coprs was definitively constituted for an unlimited period (Riaud, 2008).

From 1914 to 1918, 88 dentists died on the front lines. 156 distinctions had been awarded to dentists (Augier, 1986; Caliot, 1993).



Georges Villain (1881-1938) © BIUM, 2008.

Georges Villain was the third French president of the International dental federation (1931-1936).



A dentist operating on the threshold of a care unit, © MSSA, 2006.



A dentist on the front line, near the “Chemin des Dames”- September 1917, © BNF, 2007.

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