



Formation of the Royal Army Dental Corps

A comment from Henry Noble

In the course of recent discussions concerning the history of the development of a dental service in the armed forces, confusion arose as to whether an Army Dental Corps had existed in the British Army during the First World War when the date of its formation was believed to be 1921.

Light is shed on this subject by remarks of William Guy in his autobiography "Mostly Memories - Some Digressions"(1). He noted that the poor state of dental health in many recruits at the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 led many to believe that there ought to be an Army Dental Corps. This situation was met by granting temporary commissions with the rank of Lieutenant to a number of dentists so that in 1915, one hundred and fifty-five dentists held commissions in the British Army.

Meanwhile some civilian dentists were doing voluntary unpaid work for recruits and soldiers while others were doing a roaring trade in extractions and dentures. Necessary improvements in the provision of dental services to the troops continued to call for many additional dental officers in the Army and for the appointment of an Inspecting Dental Officer in each Command. William Guy was offered the post of Inspecting Dental Officer, Scottish Command but declined since he preferred to continue as Captain and later Major in the RAMC at the 2nd Scottish General Hospital, Craigeith. He recommended instead Mr W T Finlayson who later rose to the rank of Lt.-Col. Army Dental Corps.

In 1916 the War Office decided to create in Scotland, a special centre for the treatment of Injuries of the Face and Jaws. Craigeith was chosen as the Centre and William Guy as the Officer in Charge. This Centre had 125 beds. William Guy was made Officer in Charge of the Principal Dental Centre and had thirteen officers (dentists) and twenty-seven men (dental mechanics) and one clerk under him. The "Jaw Centre" as "D" Wards at Craigeith were called, were perhaps unique in that the principles first enunciated by Lucas Champonniere advocating non-immobilisation of fractures were followed. Four hundred and four cases of fracture of the mandible were treated at Craigeith in this way and the restoration of function including bony union was obtained in all but two cases.

Throughout the War, the Representative Board of the British Dental Association had been much taken up with the exemption of dentists and dental mechanics under the Military Service Act. In 1915 the Representative Board appointed a committee to consider the question of an Army Dental Corps and to submit a scheme. On 4th January 1921 the Army Dental Corps was established by Royal Warrant. It can thus be seen that practical considerations dictated the formation and development of an effective Army Dental Corps before it was officially inaugurated in the post-war years.

(1) "Mostly Memories - Some Digressions by William Guy, Cousland, Edinburgh, 1948."
