The work of a war hospital

Frederick A. Washburn, MD, president of the MGH, was authorized to direct and organize Base Hospital No. 6 in December 1915. Fort Bragg, NC, was selected as the location for the hospital, which opened in early January 1916. The base hospital initially comprised of a series of tents in Camiers, France, and later moved to Boulogne.

Throughout the war, MGH staff served at several war hospitals, including Base Hospital No. 6, created by Harvard Medical School and taught by two Harvard professors. The hospital was initially comprised of a series of tents in Camiers, France, and later moved to Boulogne.

Base hospitals offered a unique opportunity to learn the treatment of war and service injuries that complicated the usual disorders a surgeon might find. As a wounded soldier arrived at a base hospital, his chance of survival was good. The majority of medical care was provided by the surgeon who saw the patient. Success depended on the expertise and experience of the surgeon, his colleagues and his staff. The work of a war hospital was characterized by the hard work of surgeons, nurses, orderlies, and patients.

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“Dare we confess that, as members of Massachusetts General Hospital – the home of the discovery of ether – we used chloroform freely to induce unconsciousness. Perhaps we were fortunate that in over two hundred anesthesias included in this way, no deaths occurred.”

As one of the few large American hospitals to prepare for military action long before the United States declared war on Germany, the hospital was ready to take the field when the call came in, April 1917.

I would like to record here my appreciation of a splendid organization which went out from the Massachusetts General Hospital, to the French army, was there a trained person, ready with the knowledge and ability to carry out the task. The hospital staffed for many patients was, and I firmly believe, one of the real sources of strength of the Medical Department of the American Expeditionary Forces.

The work of a war hospital was characterized by the hard work of surgeons, nurses, orderlies, and patients.

“But I do not think the war was won by the speed of the new heavy artillery and the use of poison gas. The fighting was not won by the new weapons alone; it was the outcome of the battle of the front lines. The warfare of the Great War was a war of attrition. It was a war that could be won only by sacrifice, patience, and endurance.”

“A century ago, a Harvard Medical School group – including MGH staff members – called upon to do, and did it in a spirit of commendable devotion and sacrifice.”

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WWI timeline

1914

WWI (1914 - 1918) involved all major economic powers of the day. It was marked by slow trench warfare, new weaponry such as tanks and automatic guns and the first widespread use of chemical weapons. The United States joined WWI in April 1917, after Germany attacked a number of American ships and sought an alliance with Mexico against the U.S. While isolationist and pacifist groups rallied against the war, many others supported U.S. involvement. The global political climate after WWI set the stage for World War II just over 20 years later.

1917

Several PHS departments temporarily closed due to "war conditions.

May 15

PHS, Philip Hance receives its first patient. Two buildings at the Philip Hance and the Moody Memorial Buildings were completed in 1917. The Philip Hance branch of the stock market office in Gotham, the original was at a time when most wealthy people avoided hospitals.

May 24

United States joins WWI in April 1917, after Germany attacked a number of American ships and sought an alliance with Mexico against the U.S. While isolationist and pacifist groups rallied against the war, many others supported U.S. involvement. The global political climate after WWI set the stage for World War II just over 20 years later.

May 27

U.S. Army Base Hospital No. 6, a medical/surgical unit of MGH physicians and nurses, is activated under the command of Washburn.

May 27

Joseph B. Howland, MD, is named acting administrator in Washburn’s absence.

May 30

Base Hospital No. 5 (Harvard, Brigham and some MGHers via Harvard) is stationed in Camiers, France.

1918

January

Influenza is first observed in Kansas.

January 29 - February 20

No patients other than emergencies are admitted to the MGH because of a severe scarlet fever outbreak. The confirmed and suspected cases requiring quarantine include 10 house pupils, 27 nurses, 21 employees and 21 patients.

June - August

Influenza reaches pandemic levels. More than 800 influenza cases admitted to MGH. October 1

Mary Wright is appointed house pupil to the Children’s Medical Service; she is the first woman to be a house pupil at the MGH.

October 16

Ether Day celebrations omitted at MGH because of the flu epidemic and the war.

November 11

Armistice agreement signed.

1919

June 28

Treaty of Versailles is signed.

June 29

Base Hospital No. 6 nurses leave Boston for Ellis Island.

July 28

Staff arrives in Talence.

July 28

Sara E. Parsons, RN, is appointed acting chief nurse by commanding officer.

September 1

Base Hospital No. 6 is officially turned over to U.S. control.

1919

January

Influenza reaches pandemic levels.

March - April

More than 200 influenza cases admitted to PHS.

October 5

May 30th is observed “house pupil” in the Children’s Medical Service due to the first week in a four-week period at the PHS.

October 16

Mark II celebration exercises at MGH because of the fall epidemic and the war.

November 11

Armistice agreement signed.

1913

Frederic A. Washburn, MD, director of the PHS, initiates a meeting with U.S. Army Surgeon General William C. Gorgas to discuss organizing a military hospital in the event of a war.

1916

March 13

Washburn is authorized to open a mobile hospital unit.

1917

Several PHS departments temporarily closed due to "war conditions.

June 29

Base Hospital No. 6 nurses leave Boston for Ellis Island.

July 28

Staff arrives in Talence.

July 28

Sara E. Parsons, RN, is appointed acting chief nurse by commanding officer.

September 1

Base Hospital No. 6 is officially turned over to U.S. control.

May 21

Orders are received for Base Hospital No. 6 to prepare for embarkation.

October

Highest volume month for Base Hospital No. 6: 4,378 admissions and 528 surgeries.

October 16

Base Hospital No. 6 celebrates Ether Day with a dinner in Talence.

May 17

MGH's Phillips House receives its first patient. Two buildings at the Philip Hance and the Moody Memorial Buildings were completed in 1917. The Philip Hance branch of the stock market office in Gotham, the original was at a time when most wealthy people avoided hospitals.

May 17

European nurse from Boston for Ellis Island.

May 22

Base Hospital No. 6 is officially opened in Talence.

May 22

Base Hospital No. 6 is officially turned over to U.S. control.

At Home Overseas

1913

1916

1917

1918

1919

1919

Base Hospital No. 6 nurses leave Boston for Ellis Island.

June 29

Sara E. Parsons, RN, is appointed acting chief nurse by commanding officer.

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