OFFICER TRAINING IN THE FRENCH MEDICAL SERVICES
L’ECOLE DU SERVICE DE SANTE

BY

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On the 12th May, 1956, at Strasbourg, a ceremony was held to celebrate the first centenary of the French army’s own medical school. It moved from there to Lyon in 1870 and its badge is now the coats of arms of both cities with the international “rod and serpent” and the insignia of the Legion of Honour. L’Ecole du Service de Santé Militaire is at one and the same time an officers’ training establishment, a military academy and a teaching hospital.

Briefly, one should explain that the Service de Santé incorporates medicine, veterinary services, public health, dentistry, pharmacy and all branches of administration required by the medical services. Each branch has, of course, its own terms of service, and officers are identifiable by uniform facings.

Competitive entrance examinations are held annually. For the medical school the examination is open to all, of either sex, who are qualified for registration as medical students and are between the ages of 17 and 25 years or, if already registered, have completed their first or second year. Other branches are similarly recruited. For the administrative section particularly, young regular non-commissioned officers of proved ability are encouraged to compete, and a large proportion of vacancies are reserved for them. With nearly a million men under arms, they appear to find little difficulty in obtaining suitable material. About three times the required number come forward each time. Competition is very keen. Selection boards sit both before and after the written examination.

In the medical school alone there will be sixty vacancies this year* for the Metropolitan Army and Air Force. A similar establishment at Bordeaux offers a further fifty-one required by the Navy and Colonial Armies. Thus one hundred and eleven students will embark upon a free medical education under this scheme.

The school proper is located in a barracks in the centre of Lyon. Originally built on four sides of a square parade ground, the block to the north was destroyed during the war. It has all the amenities that one could expect.

Until recently the teaching hospital was also in the city centre. It is now to be found about three miles to the east in the suburb of Vinatier. It is almost next door to the Faculty of Medicine and close to the civilian nursing college, a sanatorium and various other medical establishments. Across the road from

* Written in 1956.
the hospital more land has been acquired on which it is hoped to provide new accommodation for the remainder of the school.

The school and hospital are commanded by a médecin général. He has as assistant, a médecin colonel whose main function apart from that of deputy is medical superintendent of the hospital. The medical students travel back and forth in the school buses. Student officers of the administrative cadre live and work in the school, while the reservists have a barracks of their own on the other side of Lyon. Students in other branches, except pharmacy, and all females are entered as external students of the school and arrangements are made for their training by civilian faculties.

The hospital's full title is L'Hôpital Militaire d'Instruction Des Genettes, named after the famous medical general of Napoleon. Two fine murals adorn the entrance hall. One, a portrait, is inscribed "Des Genettes fait prisonnier par les Russes, Libéré grâce à sa réputation." The other shows him inoculating himself in front of his patients and bears the caption "Des Genettes s'inoculant la peste à Jaffa le 4 Aout, 1799." He was said to have inoculated himself first in order to inspire confidence among the sick.

This hospital first began to function in 1946-47. The latest addition, completed only a few months ago, is the laboratory block. The main building is H-shaped, 135 metres long and five storeys high. The laboratory block has three storeys, and is of similar shape. The isolation block, two storeys, is in the shape of a crescent-headed arrow. Yet another block was designed as a maternity wing; but this failed through lack of support and now provides living accommodation for the nurses. There are no commissioned ranks in this branch. Other buildings include three married quarters for officers, a chapel and mortuary, garages and so forth.

All buildings are intercommunicating by means of cellar corridors. Central heating is installed throughout. A fascinating device was the method selected for delivery of hot meals to wards which is reminiscent of the gadget in the draper's shop, in which he slipped your money and the bill before pulling a cord causing it to shoot across to the cashier in the far corner. The kitchen is in the cellar. Beneath the floor run horizontal lift shafts. Driven by electricity, containers shoot along these shafts until they arrive at the desired building or wing and then mount to the correct floor. A similar device delivered drugs from the pharmacy. I was sorry not to see the system functioning. They now use electrically heated food trolleys which are most effective. Of course, in this hospital they have no occasion to go outside. The trolley goes from block to block through subterranean passages.

Every department of the hospital has obviously been designed to facilitate both teaching and research. The octagonal theatres are beautifully neat and provided with a gallery for students who, on the average, would not be more than seven to eight feet from the operating table. The surgeon has a microphone which enables him to talk both to the students and his preparation room staff. Provision for air purification and cinema equipment has also been made.

The radiography and physiotherapy departments are extremely well equipped.
Machines, some electronic, are of varying types and vintage and include one or two developed during the last three to five years. Cancer patients were being treated at the time of our visit and the staff were very proud of their equipment, premises and results achieved.

The ear, nose and throat department has soundproof chambers which are really soundproof. The "Stomatologie" department, with all its grim reminders of the horrors of war, appears to be a development of our maxillo-facial units, in which the specialist in dental surgery co-ordinates the operation in all cases of facial injury, bearing in mind that if the jaw is damaged the eye and ear may also be involved.

The laboratories are a sheer delight. Being in the hands of pharmacist officers, they have every branch but pathology. Each department has its own wing and the head of each his own personal laboratory. The main classroom is spacious. The benches have places for about sixty students, each with water, gas, microscope and accessories. An annexe to this is the projection room where an American "Scopicon" micro-projector throws the picture on to a large screen.

The pharmacists cover a varied field. They claim to produce 95 per cent of the drugs used by their Services. They run the medical stores, where only drugs are stocked. Items of our P.L.M.E. Sections 2-10 are dealt with in General Stores of the Service de Santé together with what we would call Ordnance and, in some cases, Engineer equipment. Naturally, they have a large analytical department and run their own school of pharmacy. The chief pharmacist at Des Genettes is a lieutenant-colonel. This branch also has its generals.

The administrative officer, as has been seen, is trained while young. The regular officer has a two-year course. He is encouraged subsequently to continue his studies until he obtains a degree in economics, law or the arts; great emphasis is placed on tradition and custom, the first year being almost entirely devoted to the growth of the army and the Service de Santé. He studies the laws from which the army derives its revenue, its power and its rights; the manner in which these are delegated and shared by the various arms of the service. He visits civilian establishments and also studies their internal economy. He is thus well equipped for his second year when he starts practical work in a hospital.

The Des Genettes is a 750-bed hospital which is designed to expand to 1,000 or more. I found non-medical officers working in reception, Q.M. stores, the catering department, cost accounting and so forth, all serving under their own chief, the gestionnaire. This gentleman, the greybeard of the administrative officers, has a function equivalent to that of his counterpart in one of our smaller hospitals where there is no quartermaster. Everything passes through his office and he is finally responsible for all the others. He has financial power and responsibility. His subordinates are responsible to him and he for them.

British quartermasters are usually jealous of their right of access to the commanding officer. These youngsters with their lack of years or experience are grateful for the protection and guiding hand of their gestionnaire. I felt that he needed broad shoulders, because he was responsible for everything, administra-
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tion, organisation, equipment, stores and accounts. In busy periods his signature could be little more than a rubber stamp. On the other hand, it must be admitted that courts of inquiry are almost unknown and losses are rare. This was my experience everywhere I went in the French army. It may not be a true picture, but I could find no evidence to the contrary.

As practically every male of military age is a soldier, either active or reserve, the doctor gets patients of all ages. It is not suggested that all hospitals are equipped and staffed on the same scale. Des Genettes is a teaching hospital and consequently has a greater claim. Post-graduate training and the award of higher qualifications take place in Paris at the Val-de-Grâce Military Hospital, where the professorial chairs are held.

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Book Review


In this monograph the author presents a lucid clinical and experimental study of the factors concerned in the pulmonary complications of abdominal surgery. The material is well set out and the author has avoided any tendency to dwell at length on any particular aspect, thus making the book easy reading for the busy surgeon or anaesthetist. Nevertheless some subjects get more thorough attention than others.

The author emphasises the importance of the pre-operative estimation of pulmonary mechanical efficiency and describes a simple method of doing this. The importance of gentleness in operative manipulations is rightly stressed and it is interesting to be reminded that the site of the incision is of more importance than the type of operation, and the type of anaesthesia is of less importance than the experience of the anaesthetist.

Surgeons, anaesthetists and physicians will find this attractively produced monograph both stimulating and interesting.

J. M. M., R. W.

Erratum

In the article "Some Aspects, Mainly Medical, of the Gurkha Recruiting Season, 1955," by Major W. S. Millar, R.A.M.C., in the July, 1957 number, page 151: 15th line from the foot of the page: for "5.5" read "1.5."
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