EDITORIAL

Diploma in the Medical Care of Catastrophes

The Diploma in the Medical Care of Catastrophes was introduced three years ago by the Society of Apothecaries of London. The idea was first mooted by the Postgraduate Dean and Professors of the Royal Army Medical College (as it then was) and subsequently led to a formal proposal being put to the Master, Wardens and Court of Assistants of the Society of Apothecaries of London. Military readers may be interested to know that the initial suggestion for the title was "Diploma in War and Disaster Medicine" but because of the need to appeal to a wider national and international civilian audience it was finally entitled "Diploma in the Medical Care of Catastrophes" with successful candidates allowed the letters D.M.C.C. after their names.

The examination aims to assess a doctor's ability to deal with situations ranging across the entire spectrum of Disaster Medicine - from a rail crash with many acute casualties to an over-crowded refugee camp at risk of an epidemic. Although it is a civilian qualification a high proportion of recent successful candidates have been military doctors, Regular and Territorial, for the simple reason that our training gives us a considerable amount to offer in this field. Furthermore, the Court of Examiners for the diploma has a significant number of military members from all three Services and from the United States and the Netherlands.

The regulations for this diploma require the completion of a number of training modules, the submission of a dissertation on a specialist aspect of medical care in catastrophes, and success in three viva examinations. For military candidates the first requirement is satisfied by attendance of the Postgraduate Medical Officers' Course because it is recognised that military doctors are taught the necessary skills to cope with the full range of problems likely to be encountered. The training modules for which military candidates are granted exemption include personal survival, field team training, multiple casualty

management, trauma life support, preventive medicine, tropical medicine, and war surgery. Civilian candidates have to attend several different courses before they become eligible to sit the diploma.

Military candidates appear to have little difficulty in finding suitable subjects for a dissertation particularly following involvement in humanitarian operations or after deployment to trouble-spots such as Bosnia or Northern Ireland. Past submissions have included a classification system for war wounds, a discussion of suitable techniques for analgesia and anaesthesia in a catastrophe situation, an analysis of the effect of anti-personnel landmines on civilian populations, and an assessment of the role of the military medical services in delivering humanitarian aid.

Most of us find viva examinations somewhat intimidating but candidates for this diploma seem to consider the format reasonably acceptable. One of the three viva examinations consists of a discussion of the dissertation while the other two involve the use of slides to generate questions on the general principles of the medical care of catastrophes. For example candidates may find themselves explaining the principles of triage in front of a slide showing a large number of casualties or describing priorities for preventing disease if the slide depicts a refugee camp.

The introduction of the Diploma in the Medical Care of Catastrophes means that the Postgraduate Medical Officers' Course has been officially recognised for a civilian qualification and the ability of military doctors to cope in situations which would be beyond the scope of many of our civilian counterparts has been formally acknowledged. Anyone interested in sitting for the diploma should write to the Registrar, Society of the Apothecaries of London, Black Friars Lane, London EC4 6EJ.

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