Exemption from active service for dentists during the First World War

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Abstract: A brief overview of dentistry and the effect of the First World War with reference to exemption from active service.

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Introduction

By the end of the First World War, the number of practising dentists was diminished. Entries in the 1914 Dentist's Register record 5254 registered dental surgeons, which were serving a population of 46 million including Ireland. The fact that many army recruits were rejected on the grounds of their dental health was indicative of the state of the nation's teeth as a whole. Fewer dentists could only provide an even less adequate service.

Conscription was introduced in January 1916 with the Military Service Act, resulting in a steady loss of available dental care on the home front. No dental surgeons were serving at the front in a professional capacity, until October 1914 when the first were awarded temporary commissions as Lieutenants on the Special List and were attached to the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). This led to a total of 20 Army dentists serving by December that year. Consequently, most served in a combatant role unable to utilise their dental skills. Gradually, the number serving professionally in the military, both home and abroad, increased to 850 by the end of the war. Many dentists applied to serve in a professional capacity but the process was very lengthy and inevitably they joined other regiments.

The loss of men due to conscription was not replaced by the graduation of students. Many initially volunteered or later were conscripted. Instructions from Lord Derby, Director-General of Recruiting, were introduced in January 1916, allowing dental students in their final year to complete their qualification. However, they were then sent to the front to fight. This table in the BDA in 1918 illustrates the depletion of dental students (Fig 1). Guys and the Royal suffered a loss of approximately 80% and 85% respectively. Of note, in 1917 almost a quarter of students were women.

Tribunals

Owing to the loss of men serving overseas, many essential services were threatened. Exemption from military service was possible for those in occupations deemed necessary at the home front and considered to be in the national interest; teachers, doctors and munition workers were examples of reserved occupations. However, as the war progressed the number of reserved occupations was reduced.

Applications for exemption from compulsory service were determined by Military Service Tribunals. The initial hearing was presided by a Local Tribunal, usually at borough, district or town level. The decision could be appealed to a County Appeal Tribunal and a final decision could be sought for exceptional cases via the Central Tribunal in London.

Fig. 1 Dental Schools, Dental Students and the War. Br Dent J 1918; 18: 26

Dentists were not deemed a priority despite the dwindling numbers. Proof was required as to whether the community served would suffer. Letters of support were required as testament that they would be of greater benefit at home.

Richard Guy Ash

Richard Guy Ash was such an example (Fig. 2). He qualified at the Royal Dental Hospital in 1909. Most of his career was spent in Crowborough,
Sussex were he had a busy practice. He provided services for a sizeable population, which also included a number of nursing homes, the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) Hospital, several schools and a military camp.

He served with the Volunteer Force at home as a Private in the Royal Sussex Regiment between November 1916 and September 1919 (Fig. 3). He was a member of the Southern Counties Branch of the BDA, later becoming President in 1925 and was honoured with Life Membership in 1956.

His first exemption was granted by tribunal at Lewes County Court for a period of six months. However, in 1917 his exemption was withdrawn as reported in The Dental Surgeon:

‘Mr R E Ash, dental surgeon, of Crowborough, attended on the review of the certificate, and urged that he was the only resident dentist in the Crowborough district. In the last 6 months he had over 2,200 appointments booked.

The certificate was withdrawn.’

From Ash’s journal ‘Notes on Life in the 1914-18 War’ we can see his arduous workload:

‘awfully busy still..............Monday we came back from Worthing - up at 7.30, home from Surgery about 7.15 pm having had a couple of sandwiches for lunch - had a meal and started work about 8pm and finished at 2.30am. Tuesday ditto only had time for sandwiches but finished at 1.15am. Today is the same but we shall be in bed I hope before one – it is 11.15 now.’

It was the responsibility of those appealing to a tribunal to provide evidence to support their case. Several letters were written between April 14th-18th, 1917 requesting to overturn the cancelled exemption: these included those from the Red Cross, several nursing homes, the military camp, a prep school, doctors, and prominent citizens amongst others.

‘The signatures he brings will testify to the deep indignation felt at the action of the local tribunal.’

One of the supporting letters for his appeal was from the author, Arthur Conan Doyle, who was a resident of Crowborough (Fig. 4). Dated 14th April 1917:

‘Dear Mr Ash,

I am convinced that if your case is brought clearly to the notice of the tribunal they will realise that it is a proper one for exemption. A large camp, numerous schools and a considerable population are entirely dependent upon your services.’

Another letter was from Lady Conan Doyle’s father, James Blyth Leckie, also a resident of Crowborough. Dated 14th April 1917:

'I learn that there is a possibility that you may shortly be called up for military service. I therefore send these lines to say that as you are the only dentist in this neighbourhood, which, with its military, must comprise a population of
at least 15000 people. I cannot imagine that your service in the Army could in any way compensate for the attendant consequences of your removal from Crowborough. I think this fact should be clearly brought to the notice of the tribunal when your case comes forward for investigation. 9

The tribunals were eventually relegated to a specific Dental Tribunal. In a letter from the BDA to Ash, dated 12 August 1918:

'You need simply fill up the (inquiry) form for the Dental Tribunal. It might be well to inform your local tribunal that your case may now be dealt with by the Dental Tribunal and ask them, if they care to do so, to forward all the papers they have re your case to us. You will receive notice of hearing in due course — probably not earlier than a month hence.' 10

One would hope, albeit late in the war, that with a given Dental Tribunal available to make decisions that applications would be looked upon more favourably.

Dental Tribunal

In addition to the issue of many dentists serving in a combatant role rather than a professional one, there was an uneven distribution of dental services for the general population at home. Some areas had a relatively plentiful supply while others had none.

In July 1917, the Dental Service Committee was set up. This was to address cases of exemption, conditional upon the dentists providing services in areas of urgent need, with the intention of a fairer distribution of dental care. The Committee was later enlarged to act as a tribunal for registered dentists and distribute the available men between the forces and the civilian population. 11 A separate tribunal was established for Scotland.

A Parliamentary committee, chaired by Mr De Fonblanque Pennefather (conservative MP for Liverpool, Kirkdale division), recommended that dental surgeons be exempt from combat and instead be employed in their professional capacity. 12 During 1918, the government made improvements to military dentistry, including the appointment of an advisory dental officer to the War Office in March that year. Lieutenant Colonel John Percival Helliwell, one of the first dental officers to be commissioned, was in a position to understand the needs of both the Army and civilians. His suggestions were incorporated in an Army Council Instruction in October 1918, coordinating the treatment of recruits and troops. 13

Conclusion

As a consequence of war, the loss of predominately male dental surgeons and mechanics led to women embarking upon careers within these fields. Women often replaced the dental mechanics serving at the Front and there was an increase in female dental students. The dental profession proved suitable employment for both sexes.

Lessons were learnt; the events of the war demonstrated that the modern army could not operate effectively without an appropriate dental establishment that was organised and equipped for its special needs. This resulted in the formation of the Royal Army Dental Corps (RADC) in 1921, along the lines of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC).

Ada Fletcher had been responsible for establishing the Solders and Sailors Dental Aid Fund in 1914 to address the state of ‘Tommy’s teeth’, with participating dental surgeons offering their services at a nominal fee. When the War Office took responsibility for dental services for the forces, the fund was re-organised to form the Ivory Cross National Dental Aid Fund in October 1916. This was designed to provide dentistry for discharged servicemen, home army, mercantile marine and necessitous poor (including mothers and children) and continued to operate following the end of hostilities.
It was also noted that the civilian population in general needed to be better served. However, it was many years later that a relatively comprehensive, free dental service was established through the formation of the National Health Service in 1948.

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