Civil War Medical Care

Most Civil War surgeons had never treated a gun shot wound and many had never performed surgery. Yet, for the most part, the Civil War doctor (as understaffed, underqualified, and under-supplied as he was) did the best he could. However, it was the tragedy of the era that medical knowledge of the 1860s had not yet encompassed the use of sterile dressings, antiseptic surgery, and the recognition of the importance of sanitation and hygiene. As a result, thousands died from diseases such as typhoid or dysentery.

The deadliest thing that faced the Civil War soldier was disease. For every soldier who died in battle, two died of disease. In particular, intestinal complaints such as dysentery and diarrhea claimed many lives. In fact, diarrhea and dysentery alone claimed more men than did battle wounds. The Civil War soldier also faced outbreaks of measles, small pox, malaria, pneumonia, or camp itch.

Neglect of camp hygiene was a common problem as well. Ignorance of camp sanitation and scanty knowledge about how disease was carried led to a sort of "trial and error" system. Exposure turned many a cold into a case of pneumonia, and complicated other ailments. Pneumonia was the third leading killer disease of the war, after typhoid and dysentery. Lack of shoes and proper clothing further complicated the problem, especially in the Confederacy. The diet of the Civil War soldier was somewhere between barely palatable to absolutely awful. It was a wonder they did not all die of acute indigestion! It was estimated that 995 of 1000 Union troops eventually contracted chronic diarrhea or dysentery; their Confederate counterparts suffered similarly.

Doctors often took over houses, churches, schools, even barns for hospitals. The field hospital was located near the front lines -- sometimes only a mile behind the lines -- and was marked with (in the Federal Army from 1862 on) with a yellow flag with a green "H". Anesthesia's first recorded use was in 1846 and was commonly in use during the Civil War. In fact, there are 800,000 recorded cases of its use. Chloroform was the most common anesthetic, used in 75% of operations.

One witness described surgery as such: "Tables about breast high had been erected upon which the screaming victims were having legs and arms cut off. The surgeons and their assistants, stripped to the waist and bespattered with blood, stood around, some holding the poor fellows while others, armed with long, bloody knives and saws, cut and sawed away with frightful rapidity, throwing the mangled limbs on a pile nearby as soon as removed." If a soldier survived the table, he faced the awful surgical fevers. However, about 75% of amputees did survive.

Information: https://ehistory.osu.edu/exhibitions/cwsurgeon/cwsurgeon/introduction